



Chief Operating Officer  
Children's Defense Fund  
Washington, DC

## THE SEARCH

Children's Defense Fund (CDF), a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization working at the intersection of well-being and racial justice for children and youth, seeks a mission-driven and strategic leader to serve as its next Chief Operating Officer (COO). Based in Washington, DC and with a 50-year history rooted in the Civil Rights and Women's movements, CDF envisions a nation where marginalized children flourish, leaders prioritize their well-being, and communities wield the power to ensure they thrive.

CDF serves and advocates for the largest, most diverse generation in America: the 74 million children and youth under the age of 18 and 30 million young adults under the age of 25, with particular attention to those living in poverty and communities of color. CDF partners with policymakers, aligned organizations, and funders in this service. Children's Defense Fund is the only national, multi-issue advocacy organization working at the intersection of child well-being and racial justice by wielding the moral authority of programmatic proximity and community organizing to inform public policy.

Reporting to the President & CEO and a key member of the Leadership Team, the COO administers the \$25 million annual operating budget and oversees the Finance, Human Resources, Information Technology, and Facilities teams. The COO also provides executive staffing for the Finance Committee of the Board of Directors and Ad Hoc task forces, as assigned.

The successful candidate will possess a deep appreciation for CDF's mission, vision, and values of justice, equity, compassion, trust, and love. The COO will be a strategic and operational leader with proven experience related to financial management, operations, human resources, information technology, facilities, and compliance. They will work closely with the CEO, Executive Leadership Team, and Board of Directors to develop and implement processes, systems, and policies that increase efficiency and effectiveness, support programmatic endeavors, and align resources, infrastructure, and operational capacities with CDF's strategic goals and ambitions. A familiarity with nonprofit management and finance, leadership within a complex organization, and working with an engaged Board and volunteer base are

essential. As the leader of all operations functions, the COO will be an accessible and supportive manager, modeling a culture of shared accountability, problem-solving, and innovation, and motivating staff to provide a high level of service across the organization.

Children's Defense Fund has retained Isaacson, Miller, a national executive search firm, to assist in conducting this important search and to help identify outstanding candidates. All inquiries, applications, and nominations for this opportunity should be directed to the search firm as indicated at the end of this document.

## ABOUT CHILDREN'S DEFENSE FUND

Founded in 1973, CDF builds community so young people grow up with dignity, hope, and joy. Children's Defense Fund pursues its vision through policy advocacy, community organizing, and a network of CDF Freedom Schools in 100 U.S. cities and 30 states. CDF is supported by a diffuse mix of foundation, government, and corporate grants, major individual gifts or bequests, program fees, signature events, and investment income. The FY25 annual operating budget is \$25 million and as of January 2025 its investment portfolio stood at nearly \$29 million. The organization employs 120 full-time and 10 part-time individuals.

Children's Defense Fund grew out of the Civil Rights Movement under the leadership of Marian Wright Edelman. The first Black woman admitted to the Mississippi Bar, Mrs. Edelman directed the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund office in Jackson, Mississippi, worked with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. as counsel for his Poor People's Campaign, and dedicated her early career to defending the civil liberties of people struggling to overcome poverty and discrimination. In 1969, Mrs. Edelman began the Washington Research Project, a public interest law firm that monitored federal programs for low-income families and, out of that initiative, she founded Children's Defense Fund.

From its inception, CDF has challenged the United States to raise its standards by improving policies and programs for children. Over the years, the organization has become known for careful research on children's survival, protection and development in all racial and income groups, and for independent analyses of how federal and state policies affect children, their families, and their communities. CDF lets the public know how effectively their elected officials stand up for children. Through this work, CDF has influenced the child policy agenda and helped define the results for which we, as a nation, must strive.

For decades, CDF has partnered with numerous organizations and worked with policymakers to build bipartisan support to enact laws that have helped millions of children fulfill their potential and escape poverty because they received the health care, childcare, nurturing, proper nutrition, and education they deserve.

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## Strategy and Programs

CDF's programs span public affairs, literacy and leadership development, and movement building, all informed by racial equity and the lived experience of children and youth. CDF serves children, youth, and young adults across the country.

### Policy and Advocacy

Children's Defense Fund champions policies and programs to improve the odds for America's children and youth, with an advocacy focus on the whole child. CDF's [2024-2030 Public Policy Agenda](#) recognizes that children themselves cannot be the only locus of intervention for their well-being. Their life outcomes are first impacted by the environments, families, school systems, and neighborhoods in which they live. These communities must be transformed to change children's lives significantly and sustainably. Thus, the policy agenda outlines five nested areas of focus: Just & Caring Communities, Family Stability & Economic Mobility, Children's Health & Healing, Education for Civic Life & Work, and Early Learning & Development.

### CDF Freedom Schools®

The CDF Freedom Schools® program has its origins in the Mississippi Freedom Summer Project of 1964, which brought college students from around the country to Mississippi to secure justice and voting rights for Black citizens. These early Freedom Schools aimed at keeping Black children and youth safe and giving them rich educational experiences that were not offered in Mississippi's public schools.

CDF opened the first two *CDF Freedom Schools* sites in 1995 to address the needs of children who lacked access to high-quality literacy programs during the summer. *CDF Freedom Schools* today provide summer and after-school enrichment through a research-based and multicultural program model that supports K-12 scholars and their families through five essential components. *CDF Freedom Schools* focus on high-quality academic and character-building enrichment, parent and family involvement, civic engagement and social action, intergenerational servant leadership development, nutrition, health, and mental health. *CDF Freedom Schools* incorporate the totality of CDF's mission by fostering environments that support young people to excel and believe in their ability to make a difference in themselves, their families, schools, communities, country, and world with hope, education, and action.

Since 1995, more than 190,000 children (Pre-K – 12) have had the *CDF Freedom Schools* experience, and more than 21,000 young adults and child advocates have been trained on the delivery of the *CDF Freedom Schools* model.

In 2023, *CDF Freedom Schools* partnered with 128 organizations to serve over 11,600 children at 191 partner sites in 101 cities and 26 states (Including Washington, DC). Across the nation, *CDF Freedom Schools* programs served nearly 8,000 Black and Latinx children, and 175 youth in secure detention facilities. More information about *CDF Freedom Schools* can be found [here](#).

## **Movement Building**

Children’s Defense Fund’s movement building includes place-based efforts of state and territorial offices alongside targeted community organizing within key national constituencies. Place-based offices develop effective public policy, advocacy, and program strategies for their respective regions. The Leadership Development and Organizing (LDO) team builds bases of support among students and youth, faith communities, parents and caregivers, and CDF alumni.

### ***State and Territorial Offices***

In addition to headquarters in Washington, DC, CDF also has office teams across the nation, including [California](#), [Minnesota](#), [New York](#), [Ohio](#), [Texas](#), and a [Southern Regional Office](#) in Mississippi. Each team develops a state or regional strategy to pursue CDF’s mission, vision, and strategy aligned with the national policy agenda.

### ***Leadership Development and Organizing***

- [Faith Community Organizing](#): CDF’s faith community organizing programming activates people of faith in building power for children, youth, and families. Current programming includes CDF’s beloved [Hall-Proctor Institute for Child Advocacy Ministry](#), the annual [National Observance of Children’s Sabbaths®](#), Practicing Resurrection Congregational Capacity-building Program, and the Welcome Home: Young Adults Shaping Holistic Houses of Worship Capacity-building Program. Each effort nurtures ministries committed to contextually grounded theologies of child well-being.
- [Alex Haley Farm](#): CDF purchased this beautiful 157-acre farm located in Clinton, TN that once belonged to Pulitzer Prize-winning author Alex Haley in 1994. The Farm is a meeting ground for organizers, youth advocates, policymakers, and servant leaders. With gathering and work spaces, guest houses, and outdoor spaces, the Farm is a dynamic space for spiritual renewal, fostering intergenerational, interdisciplinary, and intercultural communication.
- [Black Student Leadership Network](#): BSLN provides financial support, training resources, and community engagement/building opportunities to college-aged organizers, equipping them to become advocates for justice, equity, opportunity, and well-being on their campuses and in their local communities. BSLN holds an annual convening on the Alex Haley Farm and offers a Fellowship Program for college students.
- [Alumni Network](#): The CDF Alumni Network serves as a purposeful community, propelling the organizational strategy forward via focused programs and collaborative initiatives. Comprising former staff, program participants, and volunteers, the network is devoted to nurturing relationships that bolster CDF’s mission and values centered around child and youth wellbeing.

## **Leadership**

Rev. Dr. Starsky Wilson is president and CEO of Children’s Defense Fund (CDF) and CDF Action Council.

Distinguished for activism in philanthropy, faith, and community for child well-being and racial justice, Dr. Wilson's public ministry includes service to vital national institutions. He serves as board chair for the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and Duke University's Divinity School. Starsky previously led boards of the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy (NCRP) and Forum for Theological Exploration.

Since joining CDF in 2020, Wilson has sharpened the organization's strategy while managing its first leadership transition. Upon arrival, he re-activated CDF Action Council as a sister organization for grassroots legislative education, lobbying and public accountability. In 2021, Wilson established a dedicated Leadership Development and Organizing department focused on base building with key constituencies. In 2022, this team relaunched CDF's Black Student Leadership Network to train students in community organizing and policy analysis, and initiated capacity building cohorts for faith communities to advocate for children's policy. To infuse public policy with youth voice, in 2023 he merged the American Youth Policy Forum into CDF and published a 2030 public policy agenda informed by listening sessions and focus groups within CDF Freedom Schools.

## ROLE OF THE CHIEF OPERATING OFFICER

The primary responsibility of the Chief Operating Officer (COO) is to plan, direct, coordinate, and oversee operations activities, ensuring development and implementation of efficient operations and cost-effective systems to meet Children's Defense Fund's current and future needs. The COO directly reports to and supports the President & CEO, developing aligned, multi-year operational, financial, and human capital plans and manages the teams staffing these efforts. The COO provides and/or assures mentoring, supervision, and professional development for all team members and consultation for the Executive Leadership Team on operational and fiscal matters. The secondary responsibility of the COO is executive staffing for the Finance Committee of the Board of Directors and Ad Hoc Task Forces, as assigned.

The ideal candidate will have a successful track record as a senior leader with substantial management responsibilities aligned with this position's core management functions within a similarly situated organization.

## Responsibilities

### Leadership, Management and Organizational Strategy

- Serve as strategic thought partner and work with the President & CEO to inform strategic, fiscal, organizational development, and change management planning.
- Lead the coordination of CDF's operations efforts to align with the organization's overarching vision.
- Integrate policies and practices for professional efficacy, diversity, and inclusion into organizational strategy.
- Model and inspire innovative thinking and help the organization adapt to change and face adversity.

- Synthesize data and inputs effectively and communicate results so that others easily understand.
- Develop and advance strategies to improve organizational performance, efficiency, capacity, and processes.
- Directly supervise the Controller, Director of Information Technology, Director of Human Resources and Culture, and the Haley Farms Facilities Manager to build their skills and confidence to mentor, encourage, and motivate staff.
- Deploy resources efficiently and effectively to achieve goals while balancing workload and effort and providing regular feedback to improve performance.
- Develop a team-based environment to motivate and inspire staff to work collaboratively toward CDF's vision.
- Establish annual division and staff goals to track results against accountabilities and compensation philosophy.
- Maintain up-to-date knowledge of external economic conditions, promising practices and long-term financial needs impacting the sustainability of CDF.

### **Financial Oversight and Operations**

- Work with the President & CEO and Finance Committee to develop long-term financial plans and facilitate annual independent audits.
- Guide Executive Leadership Team annual budget development efforts through training and communication with colleagues.
- Oversee fiscal and risk management efforts, including banking, investment, accounting, budgeting, compensation, and insurance.
- Collaborate with the Executive Leadership Team to develop and meet organizational goals while supplying expertise and guidance on operations systems and change management efforts.
- Collaborate with other divisions and departments to carry out the organization's goals and objectives.
- Identify, recommend, and implement new processes, technologies, and systems to improve and streamline organizational processes and use of resources and materials.
- Ensure departmental decisions and project plans such as those for staffing, development, organization, material efficiency, hardware acquisitions, and facilities are in line with the organization's business plan and vision.
- Ensure timely and accurate completion of all required reports to external sources such as the IRS, and all tax deposits are made timely and accurately.
- Ensure all operations follow applicable rules and regulations for government compliance.
- Establish, communicate, and implement operations-related policies, practices, standards, and security measures to ensure effective and consistent support and execution.
- Review and approves cost-control reports, cost estimates, and staffing requirements for projects.
- Present periodic performance reports and metrics to the President & CEO and other leadership.
- Maintain up-to-date knowledge of emerging technologies and trends in operations management.

- Identify training needs and ensure proper training is developed and provided.
- Develop human capital plans to achieve operational objectives, then hire, deploy, and support staff.

### **Culture, Change Management, and Productivity**

- Support the development and implementation of systems for evaluation and knowledge management.
- Nurture a high performing culture aligned with CDF's values: justice, equity, compassion, trust, and love.
- Deepen existing and create new outcome measures for organizational performance.

## **KEY OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES**

The next COO will be a forward-thinking, mission-driven leader with exceptional management, communication, and relationship-building skills. The COO will be excited about CDF's mission and committed to developing increased operational performance across the organization to support strategic initiatives. Specifically, the COO will work to address the following opportunities and challenges.

### **Serve as a Strategic Partner to the CEO and Executive Leadership Team**

The COO will serve as a strategic partner to the CEO, bringing a sophisticated financial and operational skillset to discussions and planning. The COO will provide the CEO with timely and accurate financial information to support decision-making, explore options, and anticipate potential issues. The COO must be an approachable educator and storyteller, able to promote financial literacy across the agency, explain complex information, offer rationales for new policies, systems, and procedures, and provide clarity around the impacts of programmatic decisions on organizational finance and operations and vice versa. To this end, it will be critical that the COO be a proactive relationship builder and collaborator with Executive and National Leadership teams and others across the organization. The COO will demonstrate a genuine interest in CDF's diverse programs and strategies in order to align resources and infrastructure with needs and goals and provide the best counsel on strategic decisions.

### **Provide Strategy and Leadership for an Evolving Organizational Infrastructure**

CDF leases its organizational headquarters in Washington, DC, as well as its state and regional offices, and owns the Haley Farm property in Clinton, TN. The COO will be responsible for overseeing all facilities operations with an emphasis on developing systems, procedures, and plans that ensure facilities are regularly maintained and properly managed. CDF is about to launch a capital campaign to further build out Haley Farm, with the vision of expanding the property to a full-scale retreat center. The COO will support the strategic, financial, and capital planning for these proposed projects, overseeing cost management, and providing the project management needed to achieve a successful and timely completion. The COO will also work closely with the CEO and Executive Leadership team to ensure that the Farm's physical infrastructure is optimized to support programmatic goals and generate revenue.



Additionally, CDF is currently engaging in strategic conversations about organizational structure, looking to move state offices to an affiliate model. The COO will be an active contributor to these conversations, providing expert counsel, data, and analyses to design and implement an organizational model that best supports the overlapping yet diverse needs and goals of the national and state offices. The COO will ensure that organizational design, affiliate and licensing agreements, contracts, and budgets are designed to support the evolution and future flourishing of CDF.

### **Build and Simplify Operational Processes and Systems**

Although over fifty years old, CDF operates in many ways like a start-up. As the organization moves into its next iteration, marked by the new leadership of Dr. Wilson, the organization needs an increased level of sophistication regarding operations across financial, HR, IT and facilities functions to respond to CDF's current complexity and aspirations. The COO will work closely with the CEO and Executive Team to review, develop, and implement processes, policies, systems, and structures that integrate, standardize, and streamline work across teams. By integrating systems across CDF, the COO will increase efficiency and effectiveness, maximize data capture and impact, and align resources with organizational goals. The COO will bring best practices and a spirit of continual improvement to their teams, identifying opportunities to leverage technology and automation when beneficial. Across this work, the COO must harness strong change management skills to lead and implement these transformations, generating buy-in across the organization by prioritizing transparency and open communication, and balancing the needs of distinct stakeholders and initiatives.

### **Develop and Lead Strong Team**

The COO leads and manages approximately 13 staff across the Finance, Human Resources, Facilities, and Information Technology teams, including four direct reports: the Controller, the Director of Information Technology, the Director of Human Resources and Culture, and the Haley Farms Facilities Manager. The COO also manages the areas of compliance and legal, which are currently outsourced.

The COO will support this team, utilizing the institutional knowledge of seasoned members while providing mentorship, professional development, and cross-training to cultivate a staff that is knowledgeable in best practices and can adapt to new systems and processes. The COO will cultivate a culture of shared accountability, problem solving, collaboration, mutual respect, and integrity, motivating staff to provide a high level of service and responsiveness across the organization.

Currently, all but one member of the Finance team is outsourced: the Controller, staff accountant, and grants management team are consultants hired through CliftonLarsonAllen (CLA). Over the last few months, the consultants have successfully caught up CDF's financials and are implementing new systems and controls to improve financial processes and compliance. The COO will assess the finance function across internal and outsourced roles and determine and implement the optimal structure going forward.



## QUALIFICATIONS AND CHARACTERISTICS

### Education and/or Experience

A minimum of seven (7) years of industry-related experience, with at least five (5) years in an executive or senior leadership role in the social sector. A minimum of a bachelor's degree in business administration, accounting, or related field. Master of Business Administration degree, Public Accounting Certification, or Juris Doctorate is preferred. Years of education may be considered for experience. Years of experience may be considered for education. Expertise across areas of financial management, human capital management, and organizational development. Experience developing and monitoring compliance with non-profit effectiveness standards, supplier diversity, and procurement processes.

### Preferred Qualifications

- Master of Business Administration degree.
- Demonstrated expertise in team motivation, delegation, and human capital development.

### Competencies

- Comprehensive working knowledge of strategic planning, organizational structure, budgeting, administrative operations, and fundraising.
- Strong planning, change management, and execution record delivering high impact interventions.
- Clear customer service ethic
- Ability to exercise good judgement, keep confidences, and demonstrate discretion.
- Suburb written, verbal, and interpersonal communication skills.
- Preference for and comfort within diverse, inclusive environments and organizations.
- Relationship and consensus building with diverse stakeholders.
- Ability to build and successfully navigate in a fast-paced, outcomes-driven, and entrepreneurial environment.
- Well-organized with high ethical standards.
- Self-directed, independent thinker, and team player.
- Analytical ability is required to gather and summarize data for reports and find solutions to business challenges.

### Personal Characteristics

- Orientation to and background of servant leadership.
- Passion for CDF's mission and purpose and ability to communicate this passion to others.
- Ability to serve as an advocate and exemplar for the vision, values, and mission of CDF.
- Demonstrated strong relational skills.

## COMPENSATION AND LOCATION

The hiring range for this position is \$182,553-\$228,192. The role is based in Washington, DC at CDF's headquarters. CDF employees enjoy a hybrid work arrangement of 3 days in the office and 2 days remote.

## APPLICATIONS, INQUIRIES, AND NOMINATIONS

Confidential inquiries, nominations/referrals, and applications (including resumes and letters of interest responding to the opportunities and challenges outlined above) should be sent electronically to the Isaacson, Miller executive search team via the link below.

Ernest Brooks, Partner  
Amble Ryan, Managing Associate  
Melissa Barravecchio, Senior Search Coordinator  
Isaacson, Miller

<https://www.imsearch.com/open-searches/childrens-defense-fund/chief-operating-officer>

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