

April 2, 2026

The Honorable Pete Hegseth  
Secretary  
Department of War  
1000 Defense Pentagon  
Washington, D.C. 20301

**RE: Request to Reverse Decision to Terminate California Discovery Youth Challenge Academy**

Dear Secretary Hegseth:

I urge you to immediately reverse the decision to terminate the California Discovery Challenge Academy (DCA) in June 2026.

DCA fills a critical gap for at-risk youth ages 16–18, providing a structured, 22-week residential program in partnership with the California National Guard and the San Joaquin County Office of Education. Students enrolled in the program can earn their high school diploma, while developing the skills necessary for a productive and self-sufficient future. Eliminating this program would effectively eliminate access to a proven, evidence-based intervention service that serves 38 counties across Central and Northern California. Indeed, the nearest Youth Challenge Academy is approximately 250 miles away.

The record does not support closure. DCA is a highly effective, cost-efficient program serving at-risk youth across a large and underserved region of California. Since opening in 2017, it has consistently met or exceeded national benchmarks in cadet retention and military enlistment rates, while demonstrating strong academic and workforce outcomes.

DCA's performance and impact include:

- **Proven academic outcomes:** Over 1,200 cadets graduated, including 410 earning high school diplomas; average GPAs increased from approximately 1.48 at entry to 3.56 at graduation.
- **Strong workforce outcomes:** Approximately 73% of cadets transition to employment or higher education.

- **Military readiness pipeline:** DCA cadets enter military service nearly three times the national youth average.
- **High retention and completion rates:** Retention rates for DCA are approximately 84%, significantly exceeding the ~73% national Youth ChalleNGe average.
- **Cost-effective intervention:** Per-graduate costs (~\$44,936) fall within national benchmarks while delivering top-tier outcomes. Independent analyses also show Youth ChalleNGe programs generate more than \$2 in social benefit for every \$1 invested.
- **Broad geographic reach:** 38 of California's 58 counties are served, with no comparable program within approximately 250 miles.
- **Community impact:** Cadets have contributed over 27,000 hours of community service, strengthening local communities and fostering civic engagement.

Given these outcomes, terminating DCA is counterproductive and inconsistent with the Department's workforce development and readiness objectives. Closure would also have immediate local consequences, including the potential loss of 19 staff positions—educators, mental health professionals, and support personnel—who are integral to the program's success.

I urge you to immediately suspend and reverse the decision to terminate DCA and to work with Congress to identify a path forward that preserves this high-performing program.

Thank you for your attention to this matter. I stand ready to engage constructively to ensure that the DCA remains a locally driven, cost-efficient, and impactful resource for at-risk youth in Central and Northern California.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Josh Harder". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Josh Harder  
Member of Congress

CC: General Steven S. Nordhaus, Chief of the National Guard Bureau