

OpenSSL Foundation Strategic Plan

January 2026 - December 2035

Introduction

This document describes the strategic plan for OpenSSL Foundation. It primarily focuses on the ten-year period from 2026-2035. We envision this as a living document rather than a static plan. It will be revisited by the Board at least annually and adjusted as we monitor performance and adapt to changing circumstances.

The plan is defined via a set of priorities. They should be used to help guide decision making, i.e. where a decision needs to be made we should ask whether the proposed action is consistent with our strategic priorities.

The plan is further defined by a specific set of goals. These goals are more concrete objectives that we should seek to meet within a given timeframe (i.e. short term, mid term or long term). Each goal supports one or more of the strategic priorities.

Context

The OpenSSL Project was formed in 1998 after development on its forerunner project (SSLey) ceased. The SSLey community decided collectively that they did not want to see the development of the software end - so they joined together to form OpenSSL. Although there was no formal mission statement or set of values at this stage, the community was drawn together by the shared goal of developing OpenSSL for the collective benefit of everyone and with a shared belief in the benefits of open source software.

In 2014, the Heartbleed bug was found in OpenSSL and subsequently fixed. This critical bug was a watershed moment for the project. By this time, development on the project had significantly slowed and was mostly being done by the heroic efforts of a handful of people. The attention that Heartbleed brought on the project changed everything. For the first time, funders stepped forward with the promise of money to help maintain the software, coinciding with a renewed interest from the community.

New people were brought into the team, and OpenSSL Foundation and OpenSSL Corporation were first created. The initial intent was that the Foundation would hold the intellectual property rights (IP in the source code, CLAs, trademarks, domains, etc). The Corporation would contract any staff, enter any agreements with third parties, and perform any other activities that were in any way considered “risky.” In this way, if the Corporation were to fail, then the Foundation could continue.

The Foundation and Corporation were created as two entirely independent entities although in practice there was a high degree of common control between them during this period, with all management decisions across both organizations being made by a single OpenSSL Management Committee. A small number of contractors were brought in to help maintain the software. In the following years, OpenSSL Corporation started to sell support contracts and more staff were brought on board to help.

In 2023, a face-to-face meeting of all the staff was held in Queensland, Australia. One of the primary outputs from this meeting was a definition of the overall mission and values for all of the OpenSSL ecosystem. This refreshed and renewed the original purpose of the project to deliver privacy and security tools for everyone, everywhere, but it went beyond that by not specifically restricting this to the OpenSSL Library itself.

In 2024, a second face-to-face meeting was held, and it was decided to modify the purpose of the two organizations. Over time, with everyone employed by the Corporation, staff time had become more and more customer-focused, with less attention spent on the broader open source community. Moving forwards, it was determined that the Corporation would continue to primarily focus on its commercial communities, whilst the Foundation would focus on OpenSSL's non-commercial communities.

In March 2024, three staff were moved across from the Corporation into the Foundation, and the board of directors and day-to-day management were completely separated. The plan was for the Corporation and Foundation to operate entirely independently of each other. Each organization would work in their different focus areas and thus collectively fulfill the overarching mission statement.

Governance

OpenSSL Foundation is managed on a day to day basis by its management team (currently 5 people):

- Matt Caswell, Executive Director and Principal Software Engineer
- Tomas Mraz, Chief Technology Officer
- Richard Levitte, Distinguished Software Engineer
- Amy Parker, Deputy Executive Director
- Jon Ericson, Communities Manager

Oversight of the day to day operations is provided by the board of directors:

- Matt Caswell, President
- Tomas Mraz, Treasurer
- Richard Levitte, Secretary

Additionally, there are currently ten members of the Foundation whose only role is to elect the directors. Membership is by invitation only, and only members can be elected to the board. The board of directors decide between themselves which role each director will take.

Funding

OpenSSL Foundation receives the significant majority of its funding from its corporate sponsors, the largest portion of which comes from the OpenSSL Corporation. We split corporate sponsors into Premier supporters (typically gifts over \$100k) and Code Protectors (gifts under \$100k, with defined contribution levels from copper through to platinum).

The intent is that Code Protectors become the regular year-on-year supporters of the Foundation, providing unrestricted gifts. Premier supporters, on the other hand, will often wish to fund a particular project in the form of a restricted gift or grant.

Additionally, we also welcome individual giving through a number of channels, although the revenue from this fundraising channel is currently quite small compared to institutional giving.

Mission and Values

OpenSSL Foundation works to ensure that everyone, including nonprofits, academics, and independent developers, has access to fundamental data privacy and security tools that are the backbone of internet protection, quietly safeguarding millions of users. We do this to help build a safer internet — one that serves the public interest and upholds privacy and security as foundational rights.

The OpenSSL Ecosystem

OpenSSL Foundation is part of a broader OpenSSL ecosystem, which also includes OpenSSL Corporation, OpenSSL Projects, OpenSSL Communities, and OpenSSL conferences with the OpenSSL Library at the center. While each of these groups has its own distinct purpose, we all agree with the principles of the overarching OpenSSL Mission, which reads:

We believe everyone should have access to security and privacy tools, whoever they are, wherever they are or whatever their personal beliefs are, as a fundamental human right.

To ensure alignment across all groups, we all share the same core values:

- We believe all our communities are important.
- We believe in the principles of open source software, not only for its inherent values but also for the transparency and accountability it provides to our security and privacy tools.
- We believe in behaving in a manner that fosters trust and confidence.

- We believe that our governance and output should be transparent and open.
- We believe that no government, organization or individual should have undue influence over the delivery of our mission.

Strategic Priorities: 2026-2035

The OpenSSL Foundation board of directors have identified the following strategic priorities for the organization over the coming ten years. The priorities are divided into Program Priorities, which are outward facing and directly related to the delivery of our mission, and Organizational Priorities, which are inward facing and about improving the Foundation itself so that we might be in a better position to more effectively deliver our mission in the future.

The priorities are set with a long term view in mind and are intended to remain relatively stable over time. Nonetheless, the board will periodically review these priorities and update them as appropriate, and as progress is made against them.

Our priorities should be used to help guide us in our decision making when considering actions we should take as a Foundation. Is a particular action aligned with one of our strategic priorities? If it is, then this would lend weight to the argument that a particular action should be taken. If it is not, then this might suggest we should consider not taking a particular action.

No particular order is given to the priorities below. The ordering does not imply relative importance between the priorities.

Program Priorities

P1: Retain the OpenSSL Library's position as a leading privacy and security library

Our primary vehicle for delivering privacy and security tools for everyone is via the OpenSSL Library. The Library is leading because it is useful for a wide range of applications and scenarios. By making the Library as useful as possible, we will reach the most people. This in turn helps us achieve our mission of ensuring everyone has access to fundamental data privacy and security tools.

We should seek to be responsive to our users' needs and retain OpenSSL's leadership because it is the most useful and therefore best placed product to enable the access to tools we are seeking to achieve. This may mean that the Library has to adapt as the technological landscape changes over time.

P2: Privacy and security education

Our mission is to enable access to privacy and security tools. A fundamental roadblock to the effective rollout of such tools is a lack of skills and understanding in this area. This priority for the Foundation is broad and could cover privacy and security education across many different audiences, including:

- IT Professionals using OpenSSL Library
- IT Professionals not using OpenSSL Library
- General public

The form that education might take is also deliberately broad and could include many different types of delivery (for example, conference talks, online articles, in person training, video tutorials, mentoring, etc).

P3: Support the advancement of open source privacy and security tools

Our mission for the provision of open source privacy and security tools does not stop at the OpenSSL Library. Whilst our development of the OpenSSL Library clearly represents a significant proportion of our contribution towards making access to privacy and security tools available to everyone, this aspect of our mission can also be achieved through other third party tools too (for example, Bouncy Castle or cryptlib), as well as major forks and derivatives such as BoringSSL and aws-lc.

Where appropriate and applicable, the Foundation can provide support to these other third party tools. Priority should be given to those tools that have signed up to the shared OpenSSL Mission.

This priority could also include programs that are intended to benefit the ecosystem as a whole. For example, this might include engagement with policy makers introducing legislation affecting this area, to educate and inform them about the needs of open source privacy and security tool projects.

Organizational Priorities

O1: Improve governance practices

OpenSSL Foundation was originally set up in 2014. As the needs and organizational structure of the OpenSSL Library have changed, and as the objectives and mission for the Foundation have been defined and broadened beyond the original OpenSSL Library only model, the governance structure and practices of the Foundation needs to adapt too. The current governance structure and practices are not considered fit for purpose.

The Foundation should seek to adopt commonly accepted good governance practices for US based nonprofit organizations where they are applicable.

O2: Secure, diversify, and grow our funding sources

OpenSSL Foundation is reliant on a small group of supporters for the vast majority of our funding, with substantial support coming from OpenSSL Corporation as well as historic reserves (currently also held by the Corporation on our behalf). This reliance on a small group of funders represents a large risk to the Foundation.

Additionally, our current funding is used almost exclusively for maintaining and extending the OpenSSL Library. With ambitions to be able to deliver programs in our other priority areas, we will need to find additional funding to support this.

We should seek to secure our existing funding sources, as well as attract new funders to diversify and grow those sources. This will spread the risk and enable us to deliver programs not directly associated with the OpenSSL Library.

Goals

Goals are more specific than priorities. While our strategic priorities can be used to assess whether or not we should take a particular action, our goals are particular end results that we want to achieve within a given time frame. They should always be there in support of the strategic priorities.

Short Term Goals (1-3 years - 2026-2028)

Become a 501(c)(3) public charity (Supports: O2, O1)

A 501(c)(3) is a US organization that is exempt from federal income tax due to certain reasons such as being charitable. Becoming a 501(c)(3) will enable us to tap into funding sources that might not otherwise be available to us (for example, certain charitable foundations in the US can only donate to 501(c)(3) organizations).

OpenSSL Foundation is currently fiscally sponsored by Software in the Public Interest (SPI) through a Model C fiscal sponsorship, which may enable us to access some of this funding. However, this is not considered an ideal solution. Fundraising through a third party introduces added complexity and cost, delays our receipt of funds raised, and dilutes our brand. While the arrangement works for the present time, our preferred route is to become a 501(c)(3) ourselves.

501(c)(3) organizations must adhere to well defined reporting rules, and there are many available online resources describing best practices for such organizations. By becoming a 501(c)(3) organization ourselves we should seek to adopt many of those best practices.

Ensure board independence (Supports: O1)

A correctly functioning board of directors should provide an oversight function of the staff performing the day to day management of the Foundation. The current board structure does not properly enable this due to the fact that all the directors are also staff members.

Therefore we should recruit more board members and gradually replace the existing board with an entirely independent board containing no staff members. This may take some while to achieve and is likely to entail far reaching consequences, such as reformulating our bylaws to enable a broader pool of candidates to become board members.

Maintain and extend the OpenSSL Library (Supports: P1)

The OpenSSL Project started with the OpenSSL Library back in 1998. When the Foundation was first formed, its sole purpose was to support the development of the Library. This will continue to be a core and ongoing goal for the Foundation for the foreseeable future.

The Foundation is well placed to support the ongoing development needs of the project and ensure that the library is well managed and bugs and security issues are handled in a timely manner.

Prioritization of features and activities should be assessed against their broad public interest. Some features or activities may not have broad public interest but are of specific interest to certain sub-communities. Where this is the case, we prioritize the needs of nonprofits, academics, independent developers, distributions and other open source projects.

The Foundation should also ensure the governance needs of the project are provided for, such as for Contributor Licence Agreements, trademarks, etc., as well as any associated resource needs such as servers for CI, hosting, backups, etc.

Mid Term Goals (3-8 years - 2028-2033)

Establish an education program (Supports: P2)

We have always performed education as part of our role. We speak at conferences, we provide documentation for the Library, we have presented webinars, etc. This goal, however, is for a more ambitious, further reaching education program. The objective is to reach people that we currently do not reach through our existing education channels. Currently, we are primarily targeting users of the OpenSSL Library. We should seek to go beyond this audience and establish a much broader and further reaching formalized program targeting IT professionals who do not use the OpenSSL Library as well as the general public.

Become a world recognized leader on the topic of privacy and security (Supports: P3, P2)

We are well placed to provide leadership in the privacy and security space. As the organization behind the world's most deployed cryptography and security library, we already have a significant influence. This goal is about taking that influence and becoming more proactive with it. When law and policy makers are making decisions in this area, we should be top of the list to be consulted and driving the debate forward. We should be present at industry conferences and events making our voice heard. The Foundation should be being invited to deliver keynote speeches.

Establish a cash reserve of six months of operating costs (Supports: O1, O2)

As a small nonprofit, we are highly reliant on a relatively small number of supporters. Problems with just one or two supporters could have significant ramifications for our funding. By ensuring that we have at least six months worth of operating costs available to us, we can continue to fulfil our mission in spite of short term funding issues. This should give us six months to respond to any unexpected changes in our forecast revenue.

We also would like to eventually establish an endowment fund to provide long term security for the future. However the initial mid-term goal is simply to ensure suitable cash reserves are available for the day to day running of the Foundation.

Long Term Goals (8-10+ years - 2033 - 2035 and beyond)

Achieve a revenue of \$3 million (Supports: O2)

We are constrained in our ability to fulfil our mission by the resources available to us. With more funds available, we can deliver more programs. A more robust programmatic offering should, in turn, attract more funders and allow success to build on success. Our current funding is not sufficient to achieve the programs that we would like to deliver. In order to achieve the necessary level of funding, we will have to significantly diversify the pool of funders that we currently have access to. We need to identify different types of funding and grow those sources over time.

Adoption

This plan was originally approved and adopted by the board on January 30, 2026.