

Hardshell Raises \$1.1M to Deliver the Data-Centric Foundation of AI Security

Defense AI expert and Army cyber veteran raise over \$1.1M to protect the sensitive datasets powering AI systems

CHARLOTTESVILLE, VA, UNITED STATES, February 12, 2026 /EINPresswire.com/ -- Hardshell, an AI security company offering protection for sensitive data in AI/ML systems, today announced it has raised over \$1.1M in pre-seed funding. The round included participation from VTC Ventures, Front Porch Venture Partners, Blu Ventures, Mojo Ventures, Not Yet Ventures, Black Prism Capital Partners, and CAV Angels, along with a number of individual angel investors.



Hardshell's founders in the University of Virginia library

The funding will accelerate the company's engineering efforts and expand its customer base across healthcare, defense, and other high-trust industries where AI adoption is constrained by data security and regulatory concerns.

While most AI security tools focus on monitoring models after deployment, Hardshell takes a different approach by providing security for sensitive and proprietary datasets used to train AI models, addressing threats before they emerge in downstream applications. "We have a narrow window to build safety and security into the foundation of AI systems," said Andrew Schoka, co-founder and CEO of Hardshell. "Privacy and innovation have always been in tension, but AI is now accelerating that dynamic at unprecedented speed."

Hardshell was founded by Hunter Moore and Andrew Schoka, who met while serving as adjunct lecturers at the University of Virginia School of Engineering. Dr. Moore is a systems engineer by training with over two decades of experience in AI, machine learning, and AI security across defense, academia, and private industry. Schoka is a US Army veteran who previously served as a cyber operations officer at U.S. Special Operations Command and U.S. Army Cyber Command. "We saw firsthand how organizations with the most sensitive data and highest stakes were

struggling to adopt AI safely," said Dr. Moore, Founder and CTO of Hardshell. "Most security solutions focus on evaluating and monitoring models after they're built: testing outputs, red-teaming, adding guardrails. That's necessary, but it misses the deeper problem. AI systems learn from their data, which means a compromised dataset doesn't just create a vulnerability, it trains one in. That's a fundamentally different threat, and it requires a fundamentally different approach. That's exactly what we're building at Hardshell."

Hardshell has been supported through multiple accelerator programs, including the Batten Institute i.Lab Incubator, the Starburst National Landing Launchpad, Lighthouse Network, and the 434 Accelerator in Charlottesville. "Andrew and Hunter have built exactly the kind of company we look for: deep technical expertise, real market validation, and a differentiated approach to a massive problem," said Gregg Bordes, Managing Partner at Front Porch Venture Partners. "As AI becomes embedded in critical systems across industries, the need for data-layer security will only accelerate."

Hardshell was founded in 2025 and is headquartered in Charlottesville, Virginia.

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