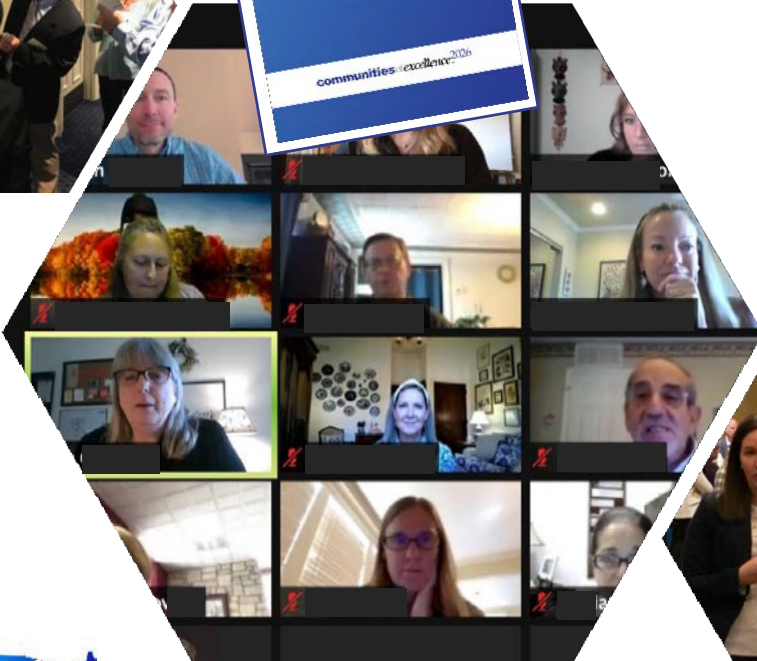


# communities of *excellence* 2026™

## National Learning Collaborative Information

OCTOBER 2022 TO SEPTEMBER 2023



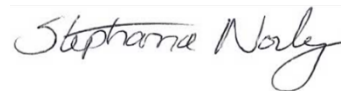
# Welcome

The United States as a nation turns 250 in the year 2026, which is why a small group of visionaries created a nonprofit called *Communities of Excellence 2026 (COE 2026)*. Our collective goal is not just to *make it* to 2026, but to create a framework that systematically addresses our nation's issues at a grass roots level – within the communities in which we all live, work, and play – such that we sustain our nation's strength for many generations, many centuries, to come.

The COVID-19 crisis has demonstrated how important it is for us to work together. Competition for resources, silo-ed activities across sectors, and duplication of efforts across organizations and businesses in communities are just a few of the many challenges we are facing. To ensure better outcomes, all community voices need to have a seat at the planning table, understand their role in improvement efforts, and work together on shared priorities to coordinate resources and activities that address root causes and achieve measurable results.

We began in 2016 with two pilot sites; San Diego County's South Region and the 18 Counties of Northwest Missouri. The progress of these pilots convinced us that we should take our effort to the next level and in 2017 we launched our first national learning collaborative of communities. 5 years later, 26 communities are participating in 5 different annual cohorts, that include rural communities and rural regions, suburbs and cities, and large urban regions.

We are pleased to add a 6<sup>th</sup> cohort of communities to participate in the learning collaborative this year. We know that America faces great challenges as we approach the 250th anniversary of the nation's founding – the year 2026. We invite you to join Communities of Excellence 2026 and communities from coast to coast in this movement to reshape America's communities.



Executive Director,  
Communities of Excellence 2026



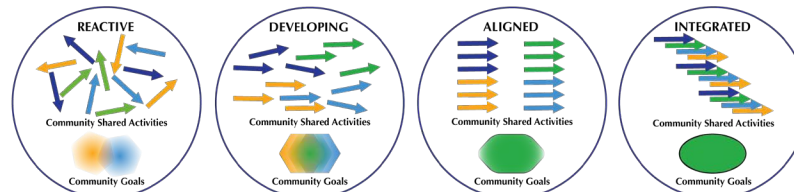
## Background

The challenges communities face today and, in the future, require a higher level of performance—a commitment to community performance excellence that grows out of the recognition that the social determinants of educational achievement, economic vitality, and health status are inextricably interwoven. A commitment among leaders across sectors and generations to take **a systematic approach to community performance**.

Such an approach exists for individual organizations — the Baldrige Principles of Performance Excellence — that the founders of Communities of Excellence 2026 have successfully used to improve the performance of organizations they have led. This proven, comprehensive, and systematic approach can accelerate a community's drive to improve quality of life for residents.

Adaptation of the Baldrige Framework and Criteria for Performance Excellence to communities began with a team of experts in 2012. Since then, the **Communities of Excellence Framework** and criteria have undergone multiple iterations based on feedback from community leaders, Baldrige experts and program staff, and engaged community partners.

**Communities benefit from a systematic approach familiar to and used by all entities within communities that ensures federal, state, local, and private sector efforts are aligned and integrated to maximize their benefit and impact.**



## Why Join?

Imagine a time when leaders within a community – official leaders (those elected or appointed to their formal positions) as well as the many informal community leaders – work together to set community vision; listen to community stakeholders to better understand community assets and needs; (re)allocate resources to address community issues or advance community initiatives; use community scorecards to monitor progress of those initiatives and the outcomes they intend to impact; and engage, mobilize, and align people resources – workers, volunteers, and citizenry – on the initiatives that will make a difference in a given community. That’s how high performing organizations succeed; we believe that’s how high performing communities will succeed.

The Communities of Excellence Framework includes a set of key questions for improving the performance of communities and the people who lead and live in them. Rather than prescribe how communities should structure their community leadership, shared initiatives or action plans, or what the mission, goals, and measures should be, the framework helps you make those decisions as a community with input from all key sectors and all voices.

Our vision is that communities that participate in this learning collaborative will be national role models for community performance excellence through ongoing collaboration. These groups will become the catalyst in a movement to reshape the future of America’s communities.

***“We educate leaders who want to improve the quality of life in their communities. To do so, they are learning they must shift mindsets, change partnership processes, and transform their culture for the better by capitalizing on their assets and opportunities. They are seeing how beneficial it is to bring all sectors together to talk and acknowledge their interconnectivity as a community system.”***

**Stephanie Norling, Executive Director,  
Communities of Excellence 2026**



## Learning Activities, Key Dates, and Program Fee

The collaborative includes twice monthly cohort-wide online sessions, monthly mentor sessions, and periodic expert reviews of progress. Online sessions are led by COE 2026 [faculty](#) and invited presenters for cohorts of up to 6 communities.

Sessions allow communities to ask questions, discuss challenges, and share best practices among cohort communities and often include assignments that assists the community to build their Profile and develop their Leadership System and Strategic Plan.

The learning collaborative officially begins in October 2022. However, immediately after your application is received there is an initial assessment involving confirmation of key dates, roles, and expectations.

### Key Dates

1. Initial Assessment Video Conference set up when application is received
2. Onboarding – Initial Assessment Meeting through September 2022
3. 1<sup>st</sup> Online Session – Tuesday October 4<sup>th</sup>, 2022, at 11:00 am PT/2:00 pm ET (60 minutes)
4. Kick-Off Conference/Baldrige Fall Conference\* – October 19-20, 2022, in San Diego, CA
5. Online Sessions – 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Tuesdays of every month at 11:00 am PT through September 19<sup>th</sup>, 2023 (60 minutes)

### Program Fee

The year 1 fee is \$25,000 and includes all online sessions, mentor sessions, expert reviews, access to the communications platform and registration fees for 2 participants to attend both the Kick-Off Conference and Baldrige Fall Conference. In years 2 and 3 the cost is reduced to \$15,000 per year. While communities only have to commit to 1 year at a time, this collaborative is designed as a 3-year engagement. As Learning Collaborative participants, the fee for our annual Assessment and Recognition Program is waived.





# Overview of Activities

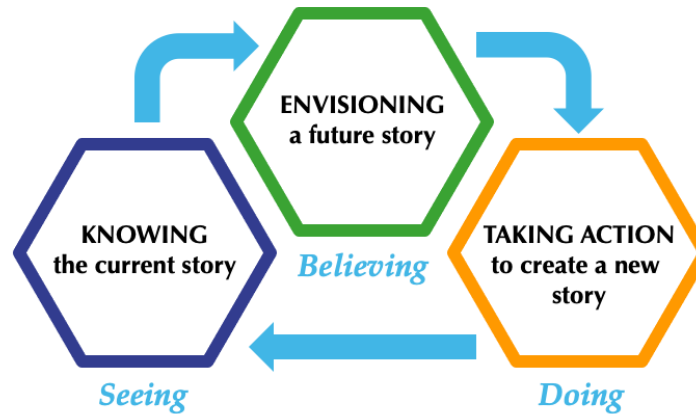
## Year 1

Year 1 introduces the principles of community performance excellence to your community excellence group. We begin with the development of your Baldrige-based Community Profile, which helps your collaborative group understand your current story and together envision a future story. It is a powerful process that supports community-wide engagement in the effort and can assist in establishing a common language across the many sectors and voices in a community. Through the first year we focus significantly on community leadership and identification of shared priorities.

## Year 1 Objectives

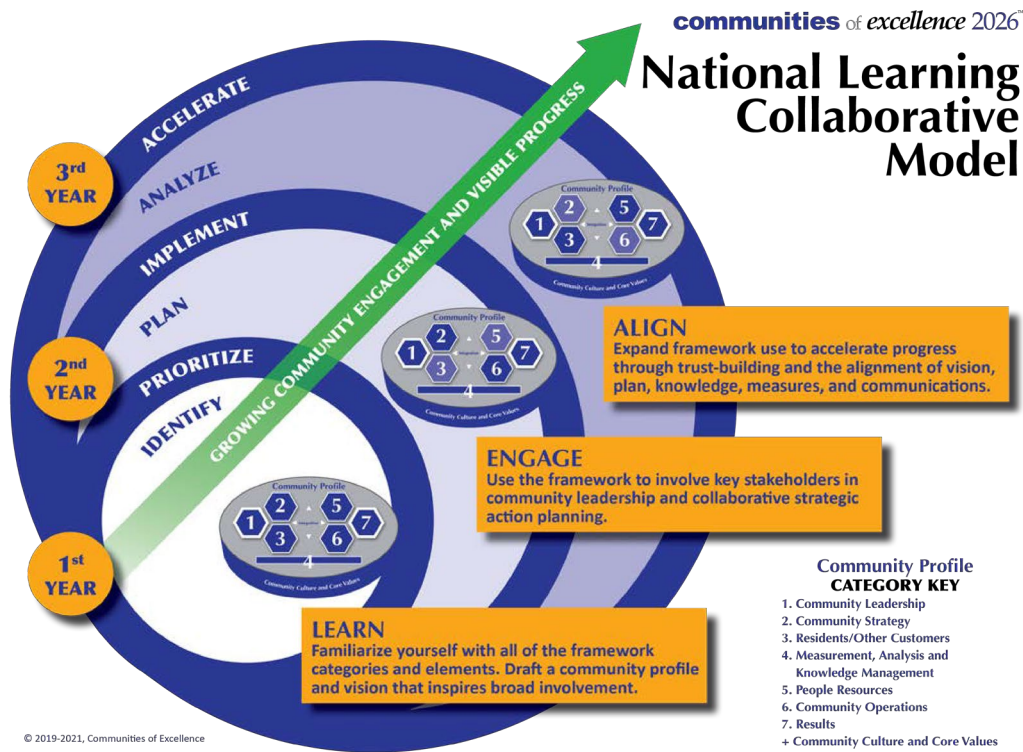
- Build and engage your community excellence group.
- Develop your 1<sup>st</sup> Baldrige-based Community Profile and understand its relationship to the questions in the 7 framework categories.
- Use the information in your Community Profile to identify the next steps towards your community excellence journey.

## A Systems Approach in Communities



“[We are] excited about the process...and energy. Everyone is believing that change can happen...not only believing, but seeing it happen.”

—Linda Place, Albany, Missouri



**Year 2** moves from planning to action, with a focus on development and deployment of community strategies based on the priorities identified in year 1. Emphasis is on identification of key results your community will track and the measures critical to understanding how successful you are at reaching your goals, and engagement of diverse voices to achieve your goals. Emphasis is placed on the core values and concepts that are vital to sustainable, long-term success.

**Year 3** assesses the systems and structure in place that are needed to sustain your community excellence efforts. Continuous improvement is emphasized through prioritization and planning to address opportunities for improvement from your community's feedback report from previous years. Key concepts around leadership, strategy, measurement, and engagement are revisited and reinforced, with an emphasis on best practice sharing between all the communities in the Learning Collaborative. By the end of year 3 your community should be well on its way to having established, values-driven community leadership who collectively visualize a shared future, speak a common language across sectors, share responsibility for community outcomes and have structures in place for sustainability, succession planning, and data-driven decision making.

## Benefits of Participation

- ❖ Collaborate with sector leaders and Baldrige experts; sharing approaches, innovations, best practices, successes, and challenges to accelerate your community's collective efforts;
- ❖ Learn from and network with other communities on their community performance excellence journeys;
- ❖ Engage with community leaders and Baldrige experts in facilitated sessions designed to accelerate your systems thinking knowledge; and
- ❖ Become trailblazers to an innovative approach to community improvement.

The greatest advantage of engaging in Communities of Excellence 2026 is evident by looking inside the hearts and minds of the community leaders involved. If you had this power of insight, you would witness...



- ✓ More awareness and consideration of the bigger picture and more regard for systems than sector silos;
- ✓ Ah-hah moments recognizing interconnectedness;
- ✓ Decision-making processes respectfully weighing multiple and diverse perspectives along with reliable data;
- ✓ Confidence growing;
- ✓ Satisfaction of knowing the right things to do to get desired results;
- ✓ A sense of pride for the positive aspects of community;
- ✓ Relief in knowing individual leaders are not alone in their vision and desire for excellence.

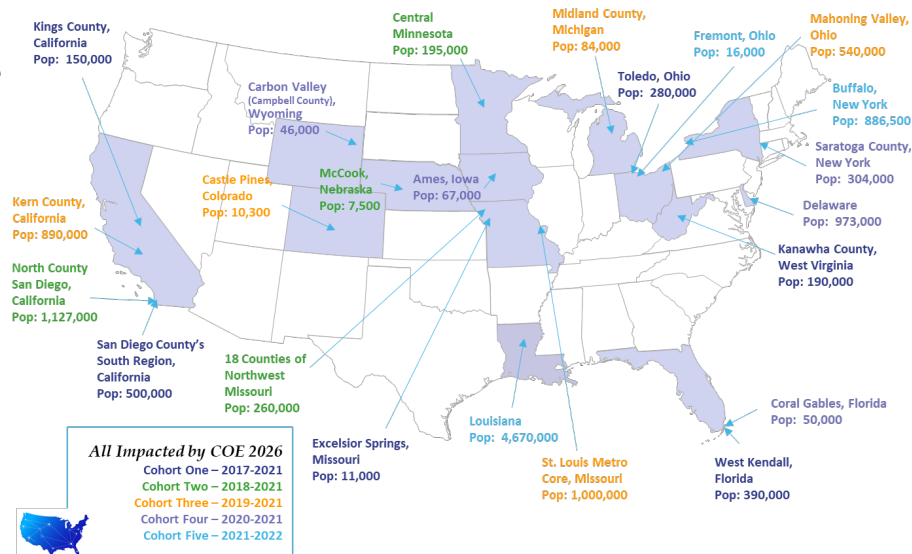


## Who Should Participate?

We work with communities ranging from a small rural city of 7,500 residents to a large urban region of over 2 million. What they have in common are cross-sector, inter-generational groups of formal and informal community leaders who are willing to commit the time, energy, and resources to apply the principles of community performance excellence to their community with a committed backbone organization(s) to support them.

We are looking for up to 6 communities that:

- Have commitments from members of key sectors such as health, education, business, government, social services and safety, as well as generations to participate; OR
- Have a pre-existing community leadership team representing multiple sectors. This could take many forms including regional coalitions or a pre-existing collaborative.
- Have an identified backbone organization(s) that will provide the ongoing support required to sustain the effort and serve as the main contact.
- Are willing to share generously and commit the time and resources required to meaningfully engage in implementing the Communities of Excellence Framework.
- Have individuals engaged that possess a knowledge of Baldrige Performance Excellence Principles or a strong desire to learn.



# Expectations of the Participating Communities

To fully benefit from this collaborative, we believe that communities will need to understand and meet the following expectations:

## Key Leadership Commitment

To maximize results, the Learning Collaborative should be a recognized priority by each individual participant as well as participating organizations' senior leadership and governing boards.

## Dedicated Project Resources

This effort requires a committed backbone organization(s) to manage the collaborative, and within it, at least 2-3 individuals to serve as project leaders for the collaborative. It is expected that these individuals will attend and participate in all sessions, complete assignments as required, and be able to educate the broader collaborative leadership on the COE Framework and its implementation. The project leaders will oversee the day-to-day activities of the team and the time, resources, and accountability needed to succeed.

## A Commitment to Applying the Baldrige Principles

Succeeding in this work requires a willingness to embrace systems-wide thinking and action.

Successful communities will commit to learning the Baldrige Principles or will have leaders that are already skilled in its implementation.

## Valuing Diversity and Inclusiveness

Participating communities must recognize the importance of celebrating diversity and actively seeking to include diverse opinions. They acknowledge that they must engage and consider all resident voices to create and enjoy living in a community of excellence.

## Dedicated Support for Measurement and Data Infrastructure

Few organizations or collaboratives have all the data they need to understand and improve their communities. In addition to using the data already available, communities may need to develop new ways to collect and use data, including looking beyond their own data systems to external sources.



## FOUNDATION STATEMENT

For America to sustain its vitality, promote opportunity, and create a more equitable society during its second 250 years of existence, we must improve the performance of communities and the people who lead and live in them.

## OUR CORE PURPOSE

To ensure that every person in America has the opportunity to live their best life in communities that are thriving

**Learn more about getting involved in Communities of Excellence 2026 and for the Learning Collaborative Application Form.**

**Visit:**

[www.coe2026.org](http://www.coe2026.org)

**Email:**

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**619.719.1045**

**Stephanie Norling**

**COE 2026**

**Executive Director**

