

DECEMBER 2021

Providing a Roadmap for Improved Economic Vitality, Health, Education, and Quality of Life in America One Community at a Time

communities of excellence 2026™

Communities of Excellence 2026 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.





Envision what our country could be like if people with many different perspectives, experiences, and dreams could agree to work together on the priorities they share while also respecting the pursuit of their individual goals.

Imagine…

… a time when leaders – elected, appointed, and volunteer – within a community decide and act together to:

- **Listen** to the full range of stakeholders to better understand the community's assets, needs, and dreams;
- **Identify** challenges that are shared by a majority or all;
- **Define** a shared community vision;
- **Prioritize** what to work on first;
- **Access** trusted data to **gain** a deeper understanding of their priorities;
- **Plan** how to best (re)allocate resources of people, time, finances, and energy through alignment, engagement, and mobilization;
- **Implement** difference-making strategies;
- **Monitor** progress by tracking output activities and outcome impacts;
- Openly **communicate** the progress to the full range of community stakeholders;
- **Decide together** what is working, what is not, and what to do next to continually **pursue** their shared vision while also **progressing** in their areas of interest.

This endless cycle is how high performing organizations succeed in meeting their goals.

We believe this asset-building systems approach is how high performing communities can also succeed in goal attainment to improve their economic vitality, educational attainment, health and well-being, and overall quality of life.

Dreams Imagined Are Being Realized

What we imagined might happen with the launch of Communities of Excellence 2026 is starting to come true. Leaders in communities are coming together across sector and geo-political boundaries, and they are finding the Baldrige-adapted Communities of Excellence Framework to be a helpful guide in their collaboration efforts.

The first few years provided greater understanding of the unique characteristics of communities compared to entities that have clear chain of commands. The success found is now fueling an even bigger dream…"every American living their best life in communities that are thriving thanks to communities and governmental agencies using Baldrige-based tools and practices, including the Communities of Excellence Framework."

We remain committed to this bold dream as we approach America's 250th birthday in 2026. We are looking ahead to what life can be like for our children and great-great-great-grandchildren and taking action today to ensure our American society of people, communities, counties, and states continue to be united and well-positioned to thrive for many years to come. Thank you for your interest and support as we look forward and learn together with you how to best develop Communities of Excellence.

Onward and upward,
Lowell Kruse and Richard Norling, Co-Founders



Vision

High-performing, vibrant communities.

Mission

Improve the quality of life for our nation's residents by assisting communities in implementing the Baldrige-based Communities of Excellence Framework.

Communities of Excellence 2026 (COE 2026) is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization that hosts a learning collaborative of communities across the country, trains communities in the Communities of Excellence Framework, adapted from the Baldrige Framework, and provides opportunities for communities to work together, share successes, challenges, ideas, and best practices, and learn from each other on their performance excellence journey.

An Urgent Need for Systems Thinking and Decision Support

When it comes to making meaningful change in communities, it is the leaders and stakeholders of each community who must take ownership. The declining indicators of the overall health, wealth, and wellbeing of the majority of American citizens are due to systemic problems. These challenges are primarily created by the culture, habits, and systems of communities and their regulating entities.

Improving our communities requires investments of all kinds. Public and private investors are trying to help by pouring trillions of dollars and countless hours each year into projects and programs intended to strengthen American rankings. Yet, many U.S. communities are still struggling to provide adequate health care, education, economic opportunity, and a thriving quality of life for their residents, as well as prepare for natural, environmental, financial, or other disasters. The problems continue to exist because of a lack of connection between all of these investments.

There is no 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.

When operating in silos and merely treating symptoms, as is often the case, community investors run the risk of limited impact, unnecessary duplication, and conflicting efforts. To ensure better outcomes, all community sectors 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 need to *build stronger communities of connection, courage, creativity, character, and collaboration* using a systematic approach.

"For us COE 2026 has created a renewed energy in the community. There are a lot of important efforts and initiatives, but many of them are very fragmented. **This process is helping us shape all of the well-intended ideas and give them structure; something we see that people are hungry for**. Having the structure of the COE 2026 Framework has allowed for alignment and synergy, and for results to be driven in a faster, more efficient manner. It's going to allow us to realize results that we once thought were aspirational."

—Angela Brandt, Toledo, Ohio



Why is our work urgent?

Declining health, wealth, and well-being indicators in the U.S.:

- ***Education disparities*** – The average performance levels for students in the least socioeconomically advantaged districts are at least four grade levels below students in the most socioeconomically advantaged districts.[1]

- ***Deteriorating public health*** - Life expectancy of Americans is now below the OECD (Organization for Economic Development and Cooperation) average and the U.S. has the highest prevalence of obesity in the developed world.[2]

- ***Inequalities in economic opportunity*** - 40-45 million Americans live in poverty[3] and smaller cities, towns and rural areas are particularly suffering, with average annual incomes about $54,000 less than larger metropolitan areas.[4]

[1] https://news.stanford.edu/2016/04/29/local-education-inequities-across-u-s-revealed-new-stanford-data-set/
[2] https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/hus/hus17.pdf
[3] https://www.census.gov/content/census/en/library/publications/2018/demo/p60-263.html
[4] https://www.federalreserve.gov/newsevents/speech/brainard20170926a.htm



What is being done to address the issues?

A few examples of investments by public and private entities in improving health, wealth, and wellbeing indicators in the U.S.:

- In 2017, the United States spent about $3.5 trillion, or 18 percent of GDP, on health expenditures—more than twice the average among developed countries. Of that $3.5 trillion, $1.5 trillion was directly or indirectly financed by the federal government.
- The federal government spent $121 billion on education and training programs in 2018. This includes early childhood, elementary, secondary, and postsecondary education, as well as job training and vocational training for veterans and others.
- Examples of federal direct or indirect support for entrepreneurship, business growth, and economic development include 2.8 billion in FY2018 for the Small Business Administration, hundreds of millions in support of manufacturing, and $116 billion in federal R&D for FY2017.
- Due to poor health, education, and economic opportunities in communities across the nation, the federal government spends over $600 billion dollars annually on programs such as food stamps, unemployment insurance, child nutrition programs, and others.
- In addition, thousands of other public and private organizations are applying a wide variety of programs such as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's HI-5 program, the National Institute of Advanced Technology's [NIAT] Community Resilience Program, the Department of Housing and Urban Development's community block grant programs, the National Trust for Historic Preservation's Main Street America, WealthWorks, Strategic Doing, FSG's Collective Impact, the Internal Revenue Service opportunity zones, the Department of Agriculture's Rural Development Innovation Center's Rural Economic Development Innovation [REDI] initiative, the Aspen Institute's Community Strategies Group, and many more.

What does Communities of Excellence 2026 add of value?

We are educating leaders who want to improve 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.

The Communities of Excellence Framework provides a proven systematic approach familiar to six sector categories *(manufacturing, health care, education, government, small business, and nonprofit)* **within communities that ensure all silo-specific and special interest efforts are aligned with each other and integrated to maximize their benefit and impact.**







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;
- ✓ Relief in knowing individual leaders are not alone in their vision and desire for excellence;
- ✓ A sense of pride for the positive aspects of community;
- ✓ A better understanding of what the root cause of challenges are and the collaborative spirit to take appropriate action;
    - ✓ The small habits of negative mindsets, self-talk, and attitudes shifting to more helpful word choices and behaviors that are changing the minds and choices of others; and
    - ✓ Conversations about activities and short-term projects moving to processes and long-term outcomes.

All of the community development efforts, investments, and projects being pursued and used in communities are encompassed in the **overarching journey to community performance excellence**. Some communities prioritize access to health care, and some are working on education and workforce development as a root indicator of prosperity. Some are uplifting a need for social justice and fair and equitable access to housing, high-speed Internet access, clean water, and affordable utilities. Still, others are addressing the need for an entrepreneurial ecosystem that better supports innovation and connects their economic opportunity to national and global markets.

Every community is unique in its needs. Therefore the strategic programs and projects they implement will be different. Yet, every community finding value in adopting the Communities of Excellence Framework and practicing true collaboration is finding that the inclusion of as many diverse voices as possible in a coordinated, organized, empowered, and aligned synchronous manner are making progress toward the vision they agreed upon together.

Of course, as with any continuous system, there are direct and indirect tangible products and projects serving as outputs and short-, mid-, and long-term outcomes. These are what can be seen as proof of the value of the Communities of Excellence Framework:

- **Community vision, mission, and values statements are formed and followed.**
- **A comprehensive community profile is a snapshot document created outlining what is known about a community's current realities.**
- **New or improved leadership structures, work systems, and communications efforts are planned and implemented.**
- **Connections to other communities are established by leaders sharing and learning across both the perceived and real borders of organizations and maps.**
- **Coaching, outside assessments and feedback, progress reporting, recognition, and awards are all a part of the experience.**



The entire process of learning and working within the framework is a catalyst and effectiveness measuring tool for all of the opportunities that broaden resident engagement around meaningful purposes and helpful projects.

"From my perspective, [COE 2026] is the only way that a community can truly have the right dialogue to advance as a complete community. If you really want sustainability and change and something to be proud of…I personally think [COE 2026] is the only structure that can really advance that conversation in a meaningful way."

—Kim Halfhill, Excelsior Springs, MO

A New Approach Based on a Proven Practice

Conception

In 2010, two former healthcare CEOs, whose organizations won the National Baldrige Award under their leadership, brainstormed ways to confront systemic problems that are eroding the fabric of our society, including inequitable access to education, seismic shifts in the nation's and world's economy, and escalating costs of health care, with no improvement in outcomes. They discussed their belief that a systems-based approach built on the same principles of performance excellence that created significant and sustained improvements in performance, quality, and cost savings in their former organizations could also address today's concerns about community performance.

Their vision led to more conversations with Baldrige representatives and government, business, university, and foundation experts from coast to coast. By 2012, a steering committee began to adapt the Baldrige Excellence Framework for use by communities. COE 2026, named in honor of the United States' upcoming 250th anniversary, was established to test the founders' hypothesis through a nationwide pilot.

Hypothesis

That a framework proved to drive performance excellence in companies and organizations (the Baldrige Excellence Framework) can be adapted to achieve performance excellence in communities and improve the quality of life for all Americans.

- **High performance and improved results necessitate a practical framework for collaboration across all sectors of the economy, well-defined criteria, community-driven goals and objectives, and a system of accountability that involves independent evaluation, measures, benchmarks, feedback, and alignment.**

- **The Communities of Excellence Framework is an advanced, comprehensive, systems approach to leading and managing communities. It enables improved outcomes in the essential areas of community life, such as educational attainment, economic vitality, health status, and safety.**

- **The Communities of Excellence Framework is a guide for positive, comprehensive, and productive collaborative planning and action throughout a geographical area. The framework promotes an inclusive approach to solving community challenges and values diversity of all types through meaningful dialogue and collaboration.**



Background on The Baldrige Performance Excellence Program

The Baldrige Program is a highly leveraged public-private partnership created by Congress in 1987 to help improve our ability to compete in the global economy by solving the quality crisis of the 1980s. The legislation mandated a three-pronged mission of:

- Establishing a nationally recognized and accepted framework of quality and performance excellence (the Baldrige Criteria).
- Managing a Presidential recognition for role-model organizations that perform very well against the criteria (the Baldrige Award). Early recipients included AT&T, Boeing, FedEx, The Ritz-Carlton Hotel, and 3M.
- Fostering the understanding and use of the framework and sharing the best practices from role-model organizations to improve performance and sustainability (an array of resources and services).



It should be noted that the Baldrige Program does not provide grants or funding to private organizations; rather, the private sector contributes substantially to program products, services, and operations through in-kind and financial contributions, worth approximately $7 million each year.

In the early years, the Baldrige Program and its criteria encouraged **manufacturing and service businesses** to adopt a robust, leadership-driven, customer-focused quality management system. Numerous studies and data analyses confirmed that organizations that adopted Baldrige significantly outperformed competitors and peers, resulting in greater efficiency, higher margins, improved customer and workforce satisfaction, faster growth, and much higher stock valuation. Success in the manufacturing and service sectors led the **education**, **health care**, and **nonprofit and government** sectors to ask Congress to add those sectors to the Baldrige Program; health care and education were added in 1999, and nonprofit/government, in 2007. In just one indicator of success, studies show that hospitals adopting the Baldrige Criteria are more likely to have better patient safety, patient experience, and clinical outcomes; better workforce engagement and retention; and better overall financial performance.

Within the last decade, 124 organizations landing in six categories have earned the national Baldrige Award. Tens of thousands have benefitted from applying to state, regional, and sector-specific programs.[1] **Now, Communities of Excellence 2026 is working with the Baldrige Enterprise to explore adding "community" as the seventh category of the award. Should the category be approved by Congress, a whole new level of recognition will be available for communities that excel in their collaborative efforts to ensure every American is living their best life in communities that are thriving!**

1 https://www.nist.gov/baldrige/how-baldrige-works/about-baldrige/baldrige-impacts





Community leaders are finding the Communities of Excellence Framework helpful for seeing, believing, and doing more to maximize their potential.

A Process of Discovery

Over the first decade of our organization, we have worked with a diverse group of experts and practitioners – some of whom were familiar with Baldrige, and some of whom were novices to the idea of integrated management and systems thinking. Together, we have discovered how to convert the Baldrige Framework, which applies well to entities that have an organizational structure of hierarchy and accountability, to the community environment where the same overarching structure does not exist. Communities do not have a chief executive officer.



The result is a new version of the framework.

> "We're causing a wave without even realizing it. As we're moving through our discussions with people, they know our background already and the purpose. **What makes COE 2026 different is the leadership education**, and that's the basis for any change you want to make."
>
> *—Nina Plata, Kings County, California*

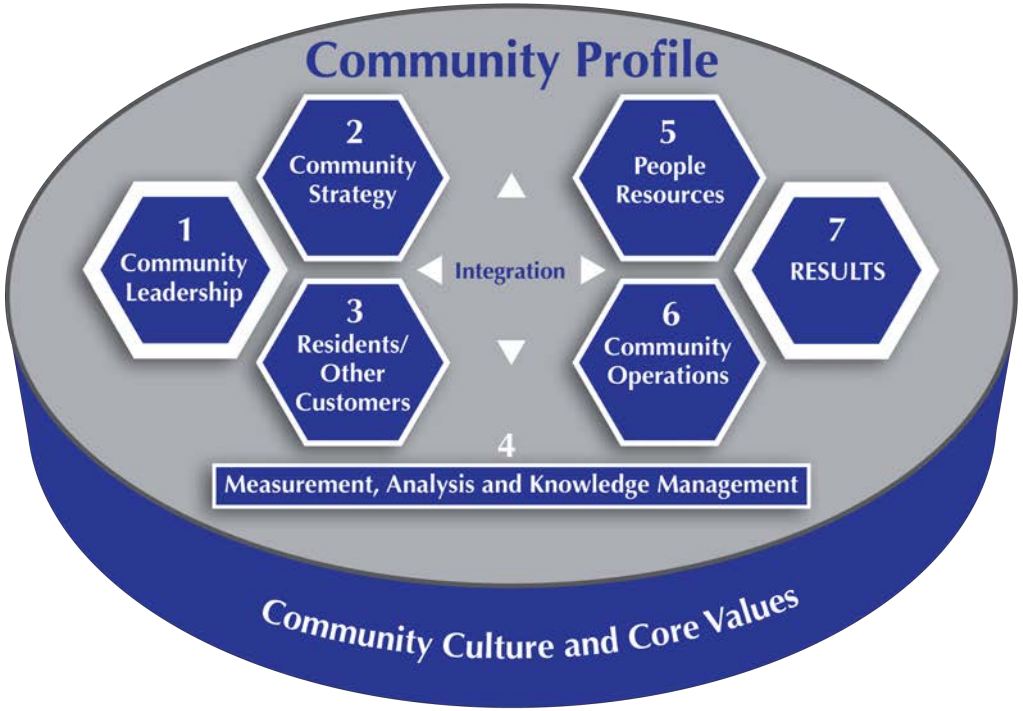
Applying Baldrige Principles to Community:

- Encourages collaboration across sectors
- Aligns people, processes, and plans
- Identifies and pursues community-driven goals
- Evaluates progress
- Instills a culture of leadership and responsibility across generations





communities of excellence 2026 Framework



Adapted from the Baldrige Performance Excellence Program, 2015. *2015-2016 Baldrige Excellence Framework: A Systems Approach to Improving Your Organization's Performance.* Gaithersburg, MD: U.S. Department of Commerce, National Institute of Standards and Technology. http://nist.gov/baldgrige. - UPDATED 6.2020

Creating a System for Aligning Attitudes and Behaviors with Goals

Pilot Community Experience

Communities are inherently diverse and complex; therefore, we have learned through our pilot that a systems approach is the best way to address community-wide challenges and opportunities for improvement to realize shared hopes and dreams.

A systems approach to change communities involves seeing, believing, and acting. It requires:

1) Knowing the current story—Looking at the elements, interconnections, and wider purposes of systems.

- The Framework helps communities assess their performance, leadership, and areas most in need of measurable improvement and innovation, with a particular focus on education, employment, health, and safety.

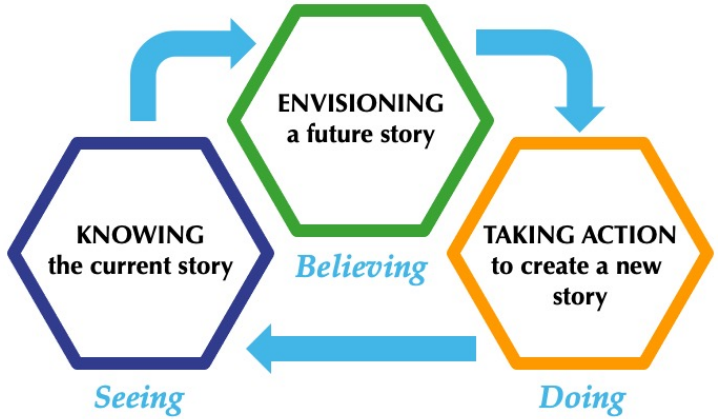
2) Envisioning a future story—Understanding and trusting the data to guide decision-making and determining a shared vision and priorities.

- The Framework guides dynamic dialogue through a common language that harnesses the best of the community's collective past, respects the people today, and responsibly pursues the opportunities for improving tomorrow.

3) Taking action to create a new story— Investing time and resources to learn and shift habits that are, when combined, the continuously improving system of "how things are done around here" in communities,

- The Framework supports community residents and their leaders in developing and empowering their skills, knowledge, and leadership so that continuous improvement becomes internalized, sustainable, and ingrained in the community's culture.

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



Defining the Community Performance Excellence Journey

Community

1. **A defined geographic area.**
2. **A group of people living in the same place or having a particular characteristic in common.**
3. **A feeling of fellowship with others, as a result of sharing common attitudes, interests, and goals.**

The word "community" can be defined in several ways that either promote inclusivity or polarization. For our work, a community is a group of people who not only decide to live or work near each other but also set up and share resources that become their systems or "way things get done."
They proactively interact to establish shared infrastructure such as utilities, roads, and facilities as well as systems for policy setting, peacekeeping, leadership elections, educating all ages, faith following, recreating and entertaining, celebrating, disease preventing and treating, caring, and more.
The Communities of Excellence Framework is a guide for positive, comprehensive, and productive collaborative planning and action throughout a geographical area of a diverse group of people who are residents and visitors of a city, trade area, county, or region.



Performance

The action or process of carrying out or accomplishing an action, task, or function.

Performance is how the work gets done. We define it as, "Outputs and their outcomes obtained from programs, services, processes, residents, and other customers that permit you to evaluate and compare your community's results to performance projections, standards, past results, goals, and other communities' results."

Excellence

The state of being very good or outstanding.

Excellence, in the beginning, is aspirational, a FRAME OF MIND, a feeling, a desired state. It is a "forever and infinite continuous improvement JOURNEY. It requires preparation, capacity building, perseverance, patience, collaboration, inclusiveness, trust, and support. Systems thinking, leadership, and behavior leads to a CULTURE OF EXCELLENCE. It either starts with or leads to a vision or drive to "be the best of the best" and "all that you can be." Pursuers will seek out promising practices and benchmark their results against the best. It requires a commitment and focus on intergenerational involvement and learning to assure long-term sustainability and reaching MAXIMUM POTENTIAL.

Journey

A passage from one place to another.

"My dad was an English major, and if you've read the book about him or heard me speak about him before, you know that the English language was really important to him. So, I'm going to start by defining the word "journey." The word brings to mind improvement, change, evolution. The dictionary also offers a synonym for journey - the word pilgrimage - and I'm sure that's what it feels like a lot of the time – a spiritual end, preceded by a long frickin' walk. In modern English, a journey refers to a trip without regard to the amount of time it takes. I'm sure you can relate."

– Molly Baldrige, daughter of Malcom Baldrige

Helping Community Leaders Envision a New Way of Working

Communities of Excellence 2026 provides training, mentoring, research, and access to a growing network of urban, rural, and regional communities for the sharing of promising and best practices and resources.

Through the Communities of Excellence Framework and the COE 2026 National Learning Collaborative, leaders from all sectors of the economy within diverse communities have discovered and developed innovative solutions that are systematically changing their communities' trajectories.

As **a decision support system**, the Communities of Excellence Framework encourages:

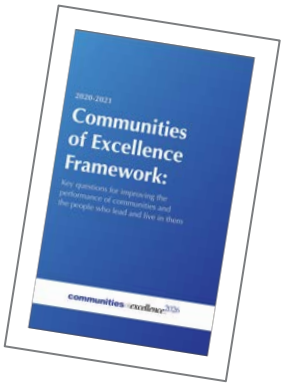
- **Leadership development in systems thinking,**
- **Management-by-fact decision-making,**
- **Collaborative efforts toward a shared vision, and**
- **Adoption of a common "community" language to document processes for capturing promising and best practices.**





The Framework is based on the following core values, beliefs and behaviors that we believe are found in high-performing communities:

- **Community Systems Perspective**
- **Visionary Community Leadership**
- **Resident- and Customer-Focused Excellence**
- **Valuing People**
- **Community Learning**
- **Agility and Resilience**
- **Focus on Success and Innovation**
- **Management by Fact**
- **Mutual Societal Responsibility**
- **Ethics and Transparency**
- **Delivering Value and Results**



In sum, the Framework helps the region's leadership and community partners collectively assess their performance, leadership, and where improvements and innovations are most needed to get positive and measurable results.

> "[COE 2026] has **given us hope**. There are a lot of great things happening. People are willing to work together."
>
> *—Steve Wenger, Northwest Missouri Rural Region*

Supporting Community Leaders from Envisioning to Implementation

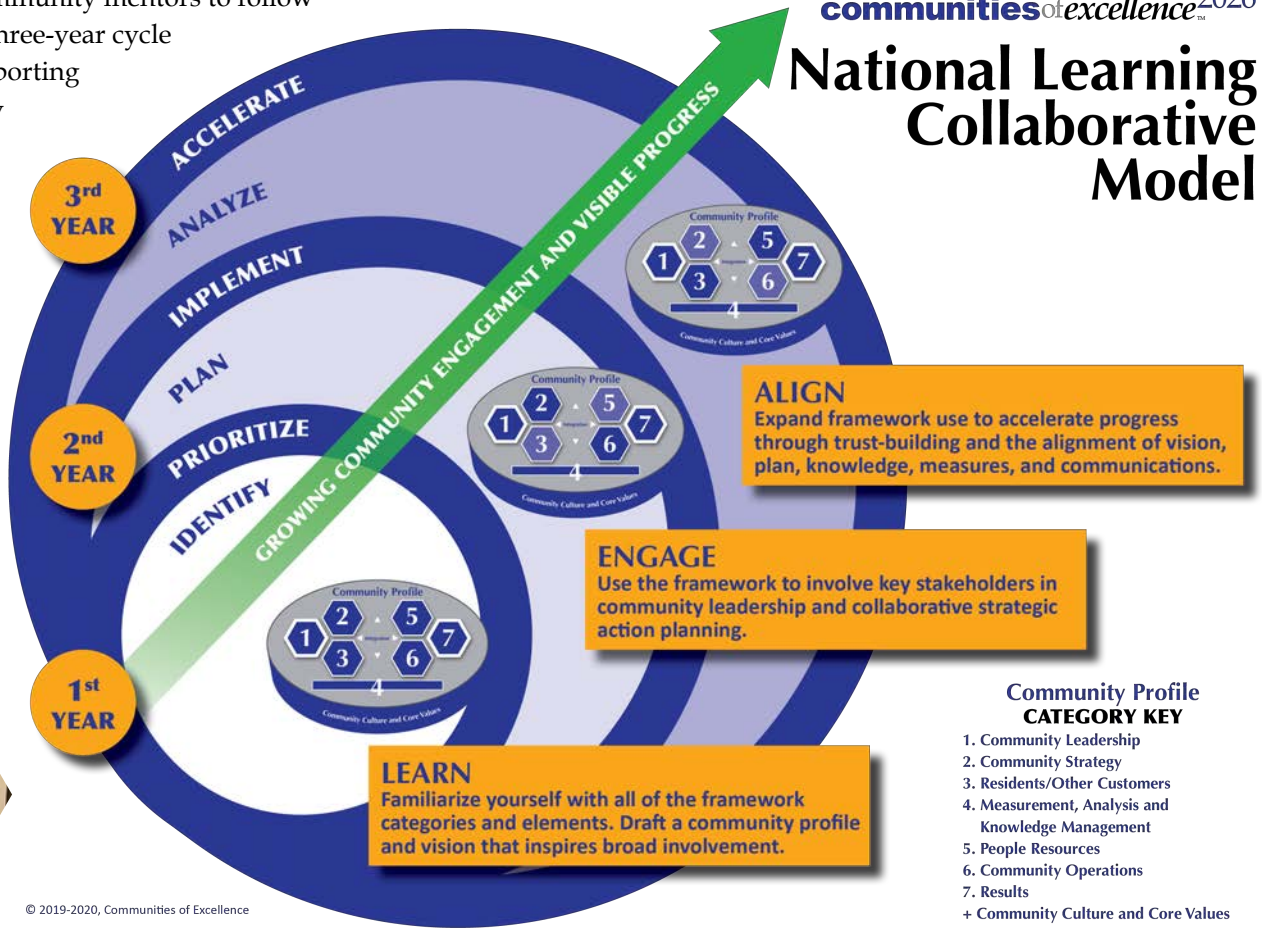
Now in its fifth year of development, the COE 2026 National Learning Collaborative is providing a progressive model for participants and volunteer faculty and community mentors to follow as they move through a three-year cycle of discovery. We are supporting the growth of community engagement and visible progress in rural and urban communities across the country. In addition to the 3-year collaborative, there are also ongoing opportunities for the first two cohorts to learn and connect through the COE 2026 alumni network.





communities of excellence 2026

National Learning Collaborative Model



Community Profile
CATEGORY KEY

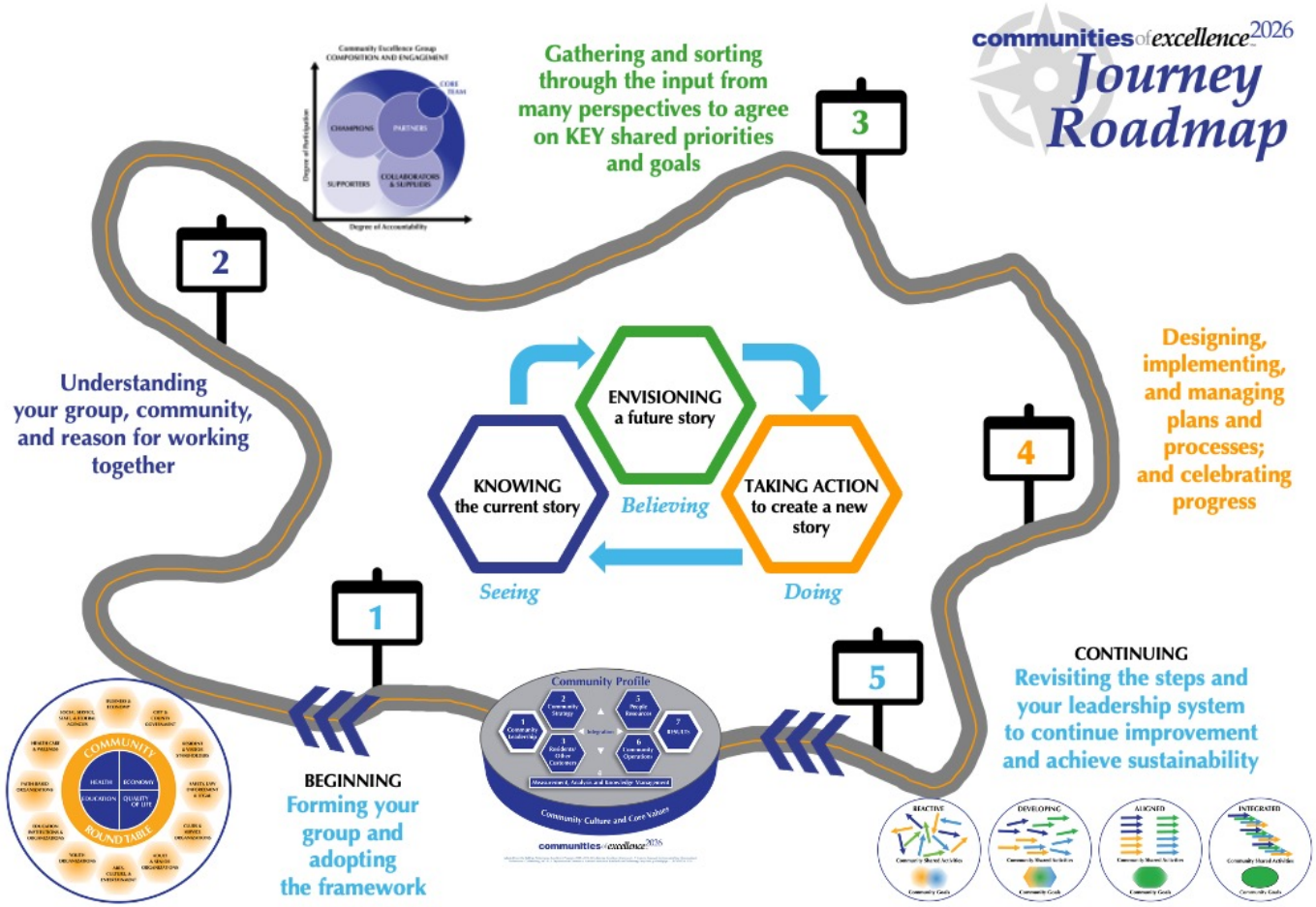
1. Community Leadership
2. Community Strategy
3. Residents/Other Customers
4. Measurement, Analysis and Knowledge Management
5. People Resources
6. Community Operations
7. Results

\+ Community Culture and Core Values

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Guiding Community Excellence Groups through a Journey

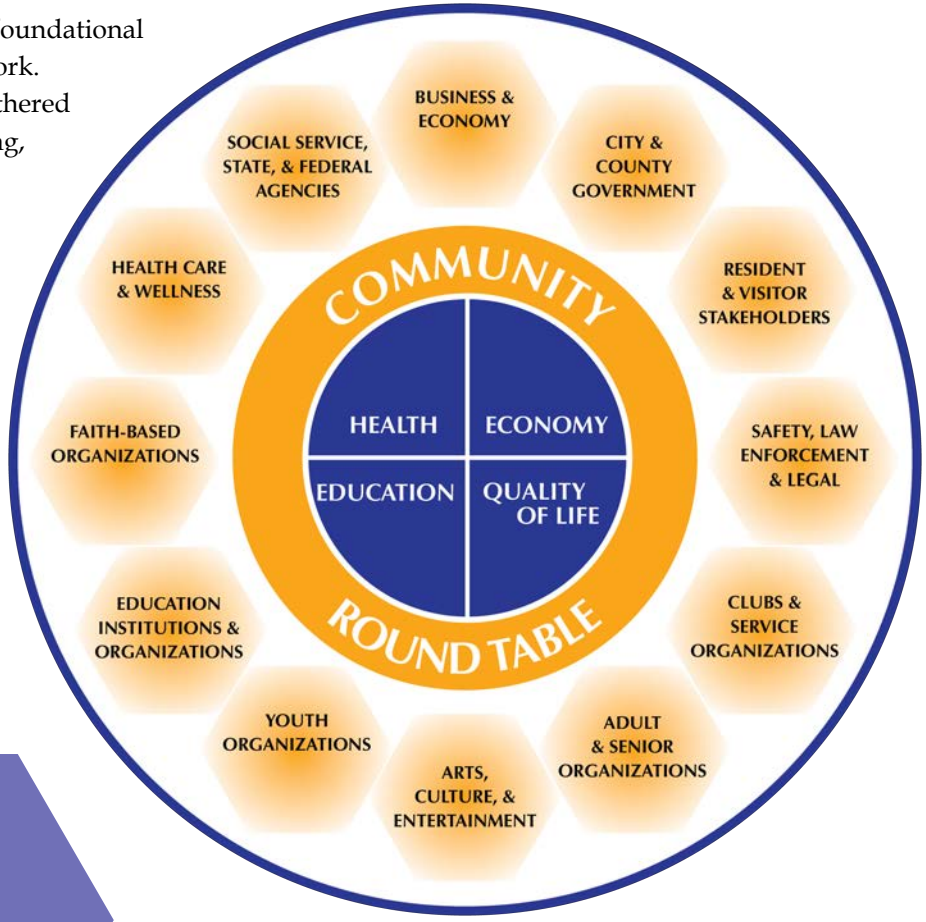
In response to requests for a visual tool that helps set expectations and communicate the general experience of leaders participating in community excellence groups, we launched this first version of a roadmap for the journey. It acknowledges five milestones and both the challenges and excitement of traveling a long and winding road. Sticking to the process is what keeps everyone on the right path of progress.





Encouraging Diverse and Inclusive Conversations to Accelerate Community Collaboration

Creating a comprehensive Community Profile is a foundational element of the Communities of Excellence Framework. It is built upon each year as more information is gathered through a continuous cycle of learning, collaborating, and measuring success. The more sectors and interest areas of a community included and engaged in conversations, planning, and action, the better chance a community has to positively align and leverage limited resources in a way that helps them attain their mutual goals.





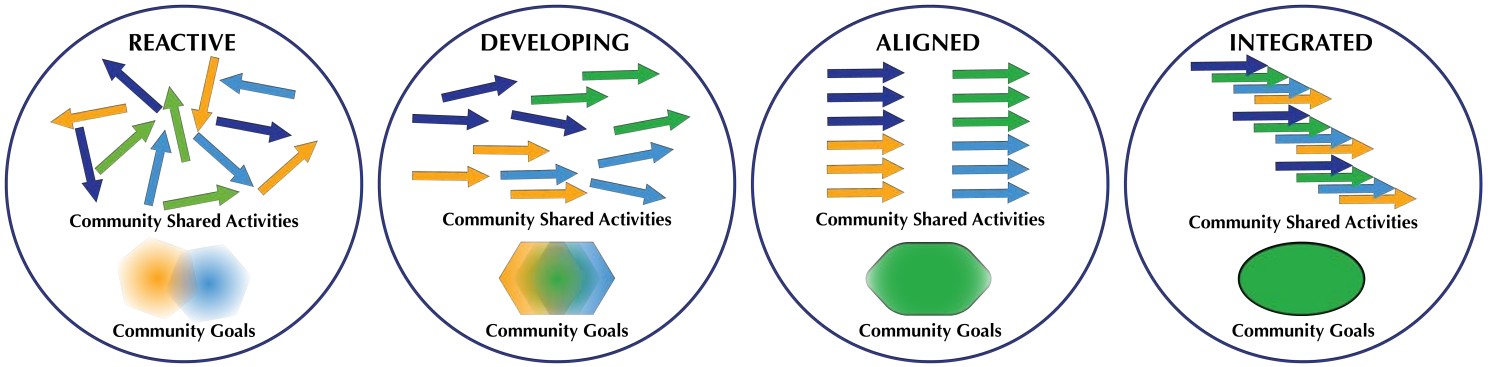


A community is a set of systems that must function together to achieve optimal performance. Everyone matters.

Moving from Reactive Activities to Results-Oriented Processes

The Communities of Excellence Framework helps leaders see a path to more positive results on their community performance excellence journey. With the coaching and feedback of experienced integrated management professionals along with peers in other pilot communities, leaders learn to recognize and value the attitudes and behaviors that can help their community reach their vision.

Community operations can be characterized on a spectrum from being reactive to an aligned role model by understanding how all of the sectors within the community work together. Those that tend to focus on activities and short-term projects without clearly defined goals are typically working in many different directions in a response mode. Investments are made, and work gets done, but the impact desired falls short of expectations. Alternatively, those that align their activities – while still respecting each others' independence – through the implementation of repeatable processes for decision-making and follow-through towards clearly defined shared goals tend to yield better results.



"We are getting out of our traditional thinking and seeing things happen across organizations. I give credit to this approach for that. We're busy working on the priorities we identified."

– Josh McKim, Maryville, Northwest Missouri Rural Region



First Decade of Results Show Promise for Widespread Impact

A decade after that first brainstorm of our co-founders, we celebrate in 2021:

- **26 communities** at varying lengths of time ranging from 7,500 to 2.8 million people representing a combined **population of 12.5 million** whose leaders have been involved in our three-year National Learning Collaborative and Alumni Network. Current enrollment includes 22 communities. With these communities, our message has reached **over 450 organizations** representing all sectors of the economy.

- Our first two cohorts have graduated from this learning cycle to enter their next-level of practical experience and growth as COE 2026 alumni participants. The leaders in this group have learned and worked together for four-five years sharing successes, challenges, ideas, and their best practices discovered on their community performance excellence journeys.

- Our evolution – New special sessions on various leadership and community development topics, a 6-session introductory course, and a new Journey Roadmap were added in 2021.

- In partnership with the Alliance for Performance Excellence and their Baldrige Fall Conference, our annual conference has grown from 46 attendees in 2017 to 80 in 2019, and 102 online in 2020. Online fatigue from the COVID-19 pandemic impacted attendance with only 88 for our 2021 virtual gathering with some opting to wait for the in-person event planned for Spring 2022.

- As an advocate of performance excellence, COE continues to welcome independent Evaluations of our programs. The University of San Diego's Nonprofit Institute, JUPER Communications, and other have reported evidence that participating communities:
  - Are satisfied with and appreciate their COE's experience
  - Identify important key issues for their community and are developing action plans; some are starting to be implemented with success
  - Are identifying and strengthening backbone organizations while holding partners accountable
  - Benefit from learning with and from other communities
  - Transfer learning, tools, and techniques back to their communities, thereby reaching countless others in communities through this ripple effect
  - Build trust and a network of diverse relationships that did not previously exist
  - Increase their cross-sector inclusion, engagement, and collaboration





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In 2021, 15 communities submitted applications for our Assessment and Recognition Program. For the first time, six of those applications responded to the entire Communities of Excellence Criteria, which is currently our top-level assessment opportunity. One of the six earned bronze level recognition (West Kendall, Florida) and one received the first-ever silver level of COE recognition (Excelsior Springs, Missouri).

A dedicated team of staff and volunteers including 10 professional faculty volunteers and 15 mentors make the Communities of Excellence 2026 National Learning Collaborative possible, and 74 volunteer examiners review applications for our Assessment and Recognition Program.

While the growing success of our organization is exciting, it is the progress that we see in the communities in our Learning Collaborative that truly deserves recognition. Following is a map and a full list of the communities involved.





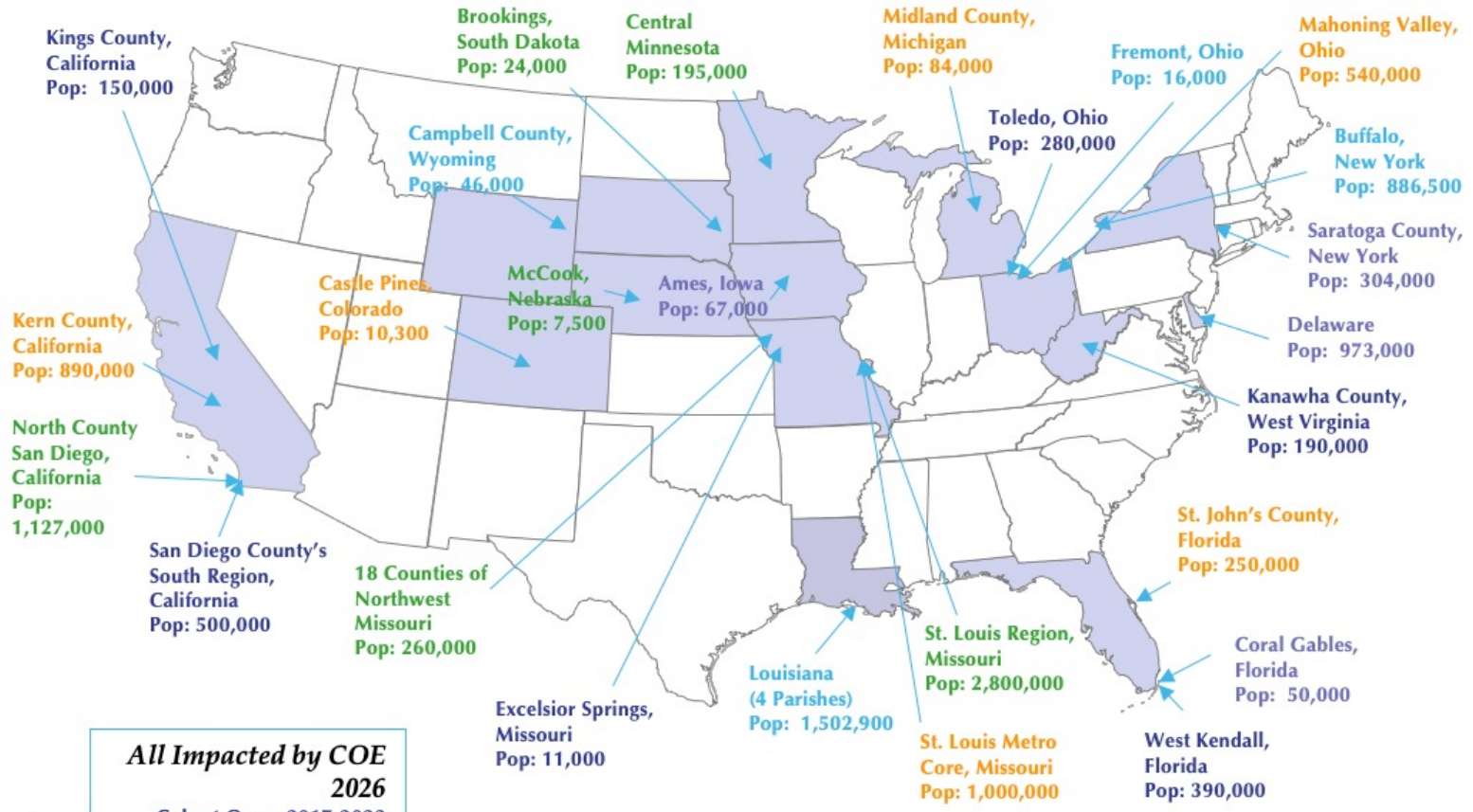


"**We hope to elevate the assessment and recognition part of our work to become the seventh category of the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award designated by Congress and coordinated through the U.S. Department of Commerce's [DOC] National Institute of Standards and Technology [NIST].**

We strongly believe that adding "Community" to the Baldrige National Quality Awards will help to bring national recognition to the importance of improving community performance."

—Stephanie Norling, COE 2026 Director

Communities Impacted through Our Pilot Since 2017: Examples of the Community Excellence Framework in Action



Communities Currently Participating Large and Small are Benefitting from the Communities of Excellence Framework

As of December 2021, there are 22 communities with populations ranging from 7,500 to 2.8 million engaged in COE 2026 that have formally adopted the framework as a way to coordinate community improvement efforts across sectors. At this point, there is a waiting list of communities interested in our National Learning Collaborative. Following is information about each of our current participants:

Ames, Iowa
Population: 67,000
Convening organization: Mary Greeley Medical C enter
Partner sectors: Health care, nonprofit, business, and government

Buffalo, New York
Population: 886,500
Convening organization: Kaleida Health
Partner sectors: Health care, nonprofit

Campbell County, Wyoming
Population: 46,000
Convening organization: Gillette College
Partner sectors: Education, business, government







Castle Pines, Colorado
Population: 10,360
Convening organization: City of Castle Pines
Partner sectors: Government, business

Central Minnesota Region
Population: 195,000
Convening organization: CentraCare Health
Partner sectors: Business, education, health care, nonprofit

Coral Gables, Florida
Population: 50,000
Convening organization: Doctor's Hospital/Chamber of Commerce
Partner sectors: Health care, business, government, nonprofit

Delaware
Population: 973,000
Convening organization: State Division of Libraries
Partner sectors: Under development

Excelsior Springs, Missouri
Population: 11,000
Convening organization: City of Excelsior Springs
Partner sectors: Education, government, health care, nonprofit

Freemont, Ohio
Population: 16,000
Convening organization: ProMedica Memorial Hospital
Partner sectors: Health care, government

Kings County, California
(Flourish Kings County)
Population: 150,000
Convening organization: Kings Partnership for Prevention
Partner sectors: Health care, education, faith community, government, nonprofit

Continued on next page

Kanawha County, West Virginia
(Kanawha Coalition for Community Health Improvement)
Population: 190,000
Convening organization: Charleston Area Medical Center
Partner sectors: Business, education, government, health care, nonprofit

Louisiana
(4 Parishes)
Population: 1,502,900
Convening organization: Louisiana Organ Procurement Agency
Partner sectors: Healthcare, nonprofit

Mahoning Valley, Ohio
Population: 542,000
Convening organization: Eastgate Regional Council of Governments
Partner sectors: Education, nonprofit, government, health care

McCook, Nebraska
Population: 7,500
Convening organization: Community Hospital
Partner sectors: Business, education, faith community, health care

Midland County, Michigan
Population: 84,000
Convening Organization: Midland Area Community Foundation
Partner sectors: Business and nonprofit

Northwest Missouri Rural Region
(Maximize NWMO)
Population: 260,000
Convening organization: Community Foundation of Northwest Missouri
Partner sectors: Business, education, health care, nonprofit, government

Saratoga County, New York
Population: 304,000
Convening organization: Saratoga Hospital/Public Health Department
Partner sectors: Government, health care, nonprofit

St. Louis Region, Missouri
Population: 2.8 million
Convening organization: United Way of Greater St Louis
Partner sectors: Nonprofit, faith community

St. Louis Metro Core, Missouri
Population: 990,000
Convening organization: Mid-America Transplant
Partner sectors: Business, government, nonprofit

San Diego County, South Region, California
(Live Well San Diego)
Population: 500,000
Convening organization: Health & Human Services Agency, County of San Diego
Partner sectors: Business, education, government, health care, nonprofit

Toledo, Ohio
Population: 280,000
Convening organization: ProMedica
Partner sectors: Business, education, government, health care, nonprofit

West Kendall, Florida
(Healthy West Kendall Coalition)
Population: 390,000
Convening organization: West Kendall Baptist Hospital
Partner sectors: Business, education, faith community, government, health care, nonprofit







The Systems Approach is an Asset at Any Time

Excelsior Springs, Missouri

communities of excellence 2026 Assessment & Recognition
SILVER LEVEL
2021





Excelsior Springs, once a hot spot dating back to the late 1800s for mineral water springs frequented by the nation's rich and famous locals alike, now serves a zip code of 17,000 people. The community borders the northeast corner of the Metro Kansas City, Missouri area, which means that many of its residents commute out of the zip code to earn and spend their money. That fact gives local leaders a set of challenges related to maintaining infrastructure, attracting businesses, and communicating that local opportunities exist for work, play, education, medical services, and commerce. A strong sense of pride in the community is what underlies the community excellence group of leaders in Excelsior Springs."

"We are proud of our town's heritage and eager to meet the challenges that the future will bring. Our Thrive Excelsior Mission is 'bringing together old and new to make Excelsior Springs a place that matters'," said Molly McGovern, city manager. "No matter how you found your way to Excelsior Springs, we want to be Your favorite place to live, work, learn, and play."

Responding to the data that highlighted challenges with housing, chronic disease, access to nutritional food options, and economic stability, the Thrive Excelsior group with the City serving as its backbone, is building on its advantages of location, heritage, and affordable retail properties with incredible historical architecture.

"Communities don't have a CEO," said McGovern. "There are all these organizations performing and working within the same footprint, but there's no one in charge." Participating in Communities of Excellence is causing the community to bring leaders from different sectors together to address needs. It is also giving them a system for organizing their roles and work.

> "The networks, communication channels, and relationships established throughout COE work over the first three years are proving extremely beneficial to community leaders during this time. As we move into recovery, these same channels will be used to coordinate a long-term response and recovery effort. We have a common strategic planning process that can be replicated to develop a community-wide response. Our shared processes or network would not exist without the work we've put in because of COE. The systems approach provided in the COE framework is an asset to communities anytime, but especially in times of crisis and instability."
>
> *—Kim Halfhill, Community Coach, Excelsior Springs, Missouri*

Expanding Perspectives to Improve Health

West Kendall, Florida



communities of excellence 2026
Assessment & Recognition
BRONZE LEVEL
2021

"Healthy West Kendall has been recognized/honored in our State Capital for our activities in helping to improve the health of West Kendall residents – as part of Communities of Excellence. West Kendall Baptist Hospital and the Florida Department of Health launched the Economic Vitality driver and formed an economic council having assembled the stakeholders needed to effectuate change. We are working on a buy local campaign as one of the recommendations from the study and have 177 partners participating so far. We have also added new economic metrics to the Healthy West Kendall dashboard as well as an evaluation tool." said Michelle Mejia, team member.

They have partnered with FDOT (Florida Department of Transportation) and installed a non-motorized counter that tracks pedestrian and cyclist traffic in order to understand how to improve safety measures in the vicinity. West Kendall is also aligning their education goals to better match their economic efforts and with the help and support of their local United Way, they created an ethics survey to better understand leadership values.

After an exercise and reflection at the COE/Baldrige Conference, West Kendall has rewritten their vision statement. "Our efforts through Communities of Excellence have helped us realize that we have evolved in our thinking and actions. Our new vision statement is:

To be a blueprint for a healthy and thriving community."

In the group's application for assessment and recognition, West Kendall also indicated how helpful having an established multi-sector group of partners in place was in responding quickly and creatively to the COVID-19 pandemic. One example is local hotel that became a valuable asset for hospital overflow.

"Healthy West Kendall is well on its way to achieving its goal. This is thanks to being chosen to participate in the COE 2026 collaborative. Through the combination of learning how to incorporate the Baldrige Framework and the faculty support we have received; we have restructured our efforts and expanded our perspective. **Looking at our community through the lens of education, economic vitality, safety and quality of life is a shift in approach that has allowed us to tap into key stakeholders and create a sustainable initiative."**

—Michelle Mejia, West Kendall, Florida

Inclusivity Improves Response to Urgent Needs

San Diego County, South Region, California





With a vast network of partners involved and five years of relationship building through the steps of community collaboration and performance improvement provided by the COE Framework, **San Diego South Region excelled at responding to the COVID-19 global pandemic**. Throughout 2020 and 2021 as each wave of challenge was presented, the organized and empowered team of Live Well San Diego, the community excellence group serving the area, rose to the occasion with a focus on quality, speed, and inclusivity as their underpinnings.

Since embarking on the COE journey five years ago, San Diego South Region has made great strides in refining their strategic planning processes, developing action plans, and implementing difference-making projects in the areas of chronic disease prevention, economic vitality, and education. A key element of the group's success is the onboarding, relationship-building, and ongoing communication efforts with hundreds of partner organizations. They are all about including many voices!

In their annual application for evaluative feedback and recognition, the leadership team shared, "Because communities throughout the region are diverse – demographically, ethnically, socioeconomically, etc. – they may have different challenges and needs. The County of San Diego Health and Human Services Agency supports these communities by bringing organizations together as partners to work together and address these challenges and needs."

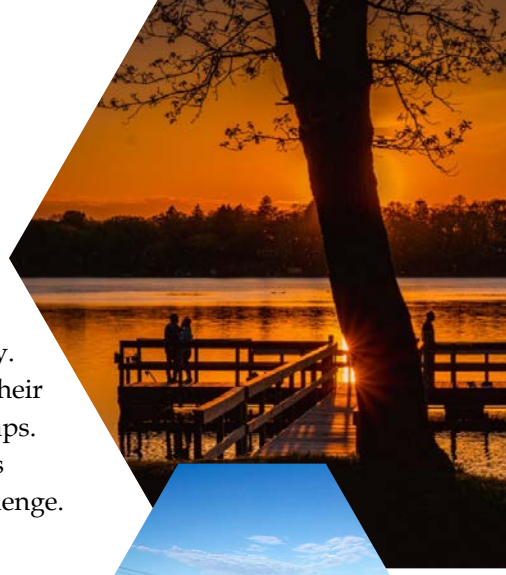
Public and private partners alike are participating with the many benefits of:

- Networking and information sharing,
- Opportunities to expand their corporate social responsibility initiatives,
- Fulfilling a personal sense of responsibility and ethical duty, and in some cases, a requirement by law to reinvest in their community.

> "Building off our prior history and successes allows us to implement the COE Framework and propel the collective work of our partners to advance the vision of Live Well San Diego. Specifically, **our enhanced strategic planning process has enabled us to further respond to the community's changing needs and allowed for innovative ideas.** The governance structure ensures that **we're advancing our collective work**."
>
> *—Barbara Jiménez, San Diego County, South Region, California*

Bringing People Together is the Critical First Win

McCook, Nebraska





The Southwest Nebraska hub of McCook may only have 7,700 residents, but it serves a market of more than 30,000 people for retail, healthcare, and other services. If that number still sounds small, consider that McCook's closest larger communities are 75 miles or more away. The leaders of this rural area have a big responsibility to provide the full range of services that their people need without being able to lean on neighboring metropolitans to fill too many of their gaps. Yet, like most communities of any size and location, McCook's community excellence group has learned that coming together across perceived and real boundaries of competition can be a challenge.

In their annual application for evaluative feedback and recognition, the leadership team shared, "The difference today [after applying the COE Framework] is that we are talking about some of the needs and gaps that may have never been discussed in other cross agency discussions. Eliminating what may have been perceived as barriers of even coming together for discussions is a huge win for our city."

McCook's initiative with Community Hospital serving as the backbone organization, has been successful at engaging more than 40 community leaders with different perspectives around four key pillars. Their mission statement is to enhance the quality of life by creating a collaborative community that focuses on education, family, economic vitality, and health. Their values of excellence, inclusiveness and diversity, and collaboration have guided their initial members representing the hospital, economic development, chamber of commerce, agriculture and University of Nebraska-Lincoln Extension to expand to the schools, regional public health departments, community foundation, local banks, industry, churches, government, retail, and the media.

"Our group is really proud of the foundation that we have set to this point. We are poised to use the momentum to achieve some really great things in our Communities of Excellence Journey"

> "At Community Hospital we are 'Leading the region to a healthier future' with our mission. We've been able to get together with community partners through the Communities of Excellence Journey over the past few years to work on things that don't affect the hospital directly, but they affect our community greatly."
>
> *—Karen Kliment Thompson, Community Hospital Vice President for Ancillary Services, McCook, Nebraska*

Engaging Residents in a More Meaningful Way

Kanawha County, West Virginia



"The Kanawha Coalition for Community Health Improvement, which serves as the backbone organization for our Communities of Excellence work, conducts our community's Community Health Needs Assessment (CHNA) every three years. Whereas past assessments compelled us to address mostly topics around wellness promotion and chronic disease prevention, our newly redesigned process has resulted in priorities that take into account the Social Determinants of Health.

Now, in addition to health promotion and chronic disease prevention, our 2020-2023 priorities include:

- Road safety;
- Access to affordable and adequate childcare options;
- Barriers to employment; and,
- Access to safe and adequate recreation, exercise, and play opportunities.

Additionally, the COE Framework has led our Community Coalition to engage our residents in a more meaningful way. Now, residents will have representation on our working issue teams and participate alongside topical experts in the development and implementation of our Community Improvement Plan. We now have new systems and processes in place to help us make decisions that are informed from the input from diverse customer groups and across all the areas of social determinants to health. As we strive for Kanawha County to be a great place to LIVE, LEARN, WORK and PLAY, we do so collectively. We look forward to improvements in our offerings, including systems, policy, and environmental changes that will result in long-lasting change."

"In the past, we often focused on our challenges, without necessarily **considering our many strategic advantages**. We've also learned that the key requirements of residents in the different geographic areas of our county are very different. We are also thinking about customers beyond our residents. They are employees of businesses in the region, legislators, [visitors], and key stakeholders in our contiguous counties that benefit from our efforts. **To be excellent, we need to consider all of our customers and their requirements**."

—Judy Crabtree, Kanawha County, West Virginia



Imagine what problems could be solved if every community in America embedded a decision support system that helped them develop leaders across sectors and generations to think and act with short- and long-term goals in mind.

Investing in Our Children's and Grandchildren's America

Like our engaged communities who are pursuing excellence, we are on a journey to ensure that COE 2026 is relevant, meaningful, and impactful for communities working to make our world a better place.

This vision will only be attained through the investment of many private and public partners at local, regional, state, and national levels.

Please join us in leveraging our collective resources.

We are our best selves when we work together!

> "We should be building stronger communities, not just stronger programs."
>
> *– Paul Schmitz, author of Everyone Leads: Building Leadership from the Community Up*

The Future of America's Communities Depends on a Continuous Investment in Leadership, Diverse Stakeholder Engagement, and Performance Excellence

Initial funding allowed us to plant the seeds for significant and systemic changes by working with the leadership of 26 communities throughout the United States. We are helping one community at a time, make progress in the complex work of improving their economic vitality, health, education, and quality of life in America.

However, the disparities and inequities that exist in our country are too urgent, and the Age of Acceleration[1] that our entire globe finds ourselves living in calls for leadership development and systems thinking – like that offered through Communities of Excellence 2026 – on a much broader scale.

We are dedicated to continuing our mission of helping each unique community assess and address its systemic challenges and optimize its opportunities towards maximum potential. We now know we are on the right path and believe communities of all sizes can benefit from our underlying decision support system.

With deeper investment in our organization's current strategic objectives of:

- Providing systems leadership and culture training and support to communities;
- Developing a database of community performance excellence promising and best practices; and
- Coaching communities with the tools necessary for data-informed decision-making.

We are confident that we can contribute to creating a more equitable society, sustain the vitality of democracy, and promote American opportunity by helping our country's communities help themselves.

Learn more about getting involved in Communities of Excellence 2026.

Visit: www.coe2026.org
Email: snorling@communitiesofexcellence2026.org
Call: 619.719.1045
Stephanie Norling, COE 2026 Executive Director



1 Friedman, T. L. (2016). *Thank You for Being Late: An Optimist's Guide to Thriving in the Age of Accelerations.* New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Innovative Leaders of Communities of Excellence 2026

COE 2026 Board of Directors - VOLUNTEERS

Lowell C. Kruse, MHA
Co-Founder and Chair; Senior Fellow, Mosaic Life Care Foundation (formerly Heartland Foundation), St. Joseph, Missouri

Richard A. Norling, MHA
Co-Founder and Vice-Chair; Senior Fellow, Institute for Healthcare Improvement, San Diego, California

Benjamin Anderson, MBA, MHCDS
Vice President, Rural Health and Hospitals, Colorado Hospital Association Denver, Colorado

Darin Atteberry, ICMA-CM/AICP
Market President, SVP Government Affairs and Strategic Partnerships, Elevations Credit Union

Angela Brandt
President, ProMedica Senior Care, Toledo, Ohio

Tommy Gonzalez
City Manager, El Paso, Texas

Javier Hernández-Lichtl
Chief Executive Officer, Doctors Hospital & Miami Orthopedics & Sports Medicine Institute, Coral Gables, FL

Karin Johnson, MHA
Former Kruse Scholar, Minneapolis MN

Brian Lassiter
President, Performance Excellence Network, Minneapolis, Minnesota

Sandra Potthoff, PhD
Retired Professor and Department Head, Department of Health Policy and Management at the University of South Florida, Tampa, Florida

Richard J. Umbdenstock, FACHE
President Emeritus, American Hospital Association, Spokane, Washington

Robert Fangmeyer, Ex-Officio Member
Director, Baldrige Performance Excellence Program at NIST
Gaithersburg, Maryland



COE 2026 Staff

Stephanie Norling, MBA

COE 2026 Faculty - VOLUNTEERS

Manuel Castañeda
Community Performance Excellence Instructor, County of San Diego Health and Human Services Agency, San Diego, California

Gary Floss
Adjunct Professor, University of St. Thomas, St. Paul, Minnesota

Jamie Ambrosi
General Business Specialist, Baldrige Performance Excellence Program, Gaithersburg, Maryland

Brenda Grant
Performance Excellence Coach, Western Maryland Health System, Cumberland, Maryland

Christel Gollnick
Founder and President, JUPER Communications, Trimble, Missouri

Kim Halfhill
Principal, KH Consulting, Excelsior Springs, Missouri

Harry Hertz
Director Emeritus, Baldrige Performance Excellence Program, Gaithersburg, Maryland

Brian Lassiter
President, Performance Excellence Network, Minneapolis, Minnesota

Sandra Potthoff, PhD
Professor and Department Head (Retired), Department of Health Policy and Management, University of South Florida College of Public Health: Emeritus Associate Professor, Division of Health Policy and Management, University of Minnesota

Diane (Dee) Springer
Director (Retired), Eaton Business Excellence Assessment program (EBEA), Eaton Corporation

Insightful Mentors Serving Our Pilot Communities

COE 2026 Community Mentors

Margot Hoffman
President and CEO, The Partnership for Excellence
Mentor Community: Kanawha County, West Virginia; Mahoning Valley, Ohio

Brian Lassiter
President, Performance Excellence Network
Mentor Communities: Campbell County, Wyoming; Kings County, California; and, Excelsior Springs, Missouri

Stephanie Norling
Executive Director, Communities of Excellence 2026
Mentor Community: Delaware; San Diego South Region, California

Lowell Kruse
Chair and Co-Founder, Communities of Excellence 2026
Mentor Community: Delaware; Toledo, Ohio

Jeff Lucas
Director, Be Safe Performance Improvement, University of Virginia Health System
Mentor Community: Louisiana

Gary Floss
Retired Quality Executive, Adjunct Professor, University of St. Thomas
Mentor Community: Central Minnesota Region

Sandra Potthoff
Professor and Department Head (Retired), Department of Health Policy and Management, University of South Florida College of Public Health: Emeritus Associate Professor, Division of Health Policy and Management, University of Minnesota
Mentor Community: Northwest Missouri Rural Region

Mike Gratz
Executive Director, Rocky Mountain Performance Excellence
Mentor Community: McCook, Nebraska

Kim Halfhill
Principal, KH Consulting
Mentor Community: Castle Pines, Colorado

Geri Markley
Executive Director, Michigan Performance Excellence
Mentor Community: Midland County, Michigan

Manuel G. Castañeda
Community Performance Excellence Instructor, County of San Diego Health and Human Services Agency
Mentor Community: Coral Gables, Florida

Diane Brockmeier
President and CEO, Mid-America Transplant
Mentor Community: St. Louis Metro Core, Missouri

Christel Gollnick
Founder and President, JUPER Communications
Mentor Communities: Ames, Iowa

Theron Post
Executive Director, Performance Excellence Northwest (PENW)
Mentor Community: Saratoga County, New York

Laura Kinney
Vice Chair, Board of Directors and Operations, Partners in Performance Excellence
Mentor Community: Buffalo, New York



Leveraging Investments and Collective Intellect for Impact

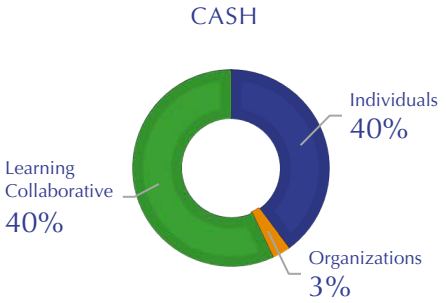
Fiscal Year 2021 Annual Report

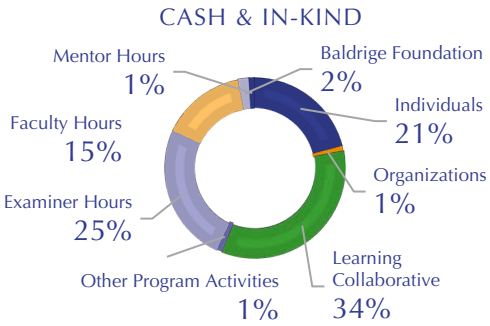
REVENUE

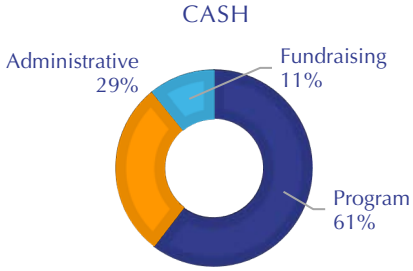
Donations: Individuals	78,330	
Donations: Organizations	6,225	
Earned: Learning Collaborative	125,071	
Earned: Other Program Activities	9,021	
Total Cash Income		$218,247
In-Kind: Examiner Hours	93,400	
In-Kind: Faculty Hours	54,000	
In-Kind: Baldrige Foundation	13,000	
In-Kind: Mentor Hours	5,000	
Total In-Kind Contributions		$153,400
TOTAL REVENUE		**$371,647**

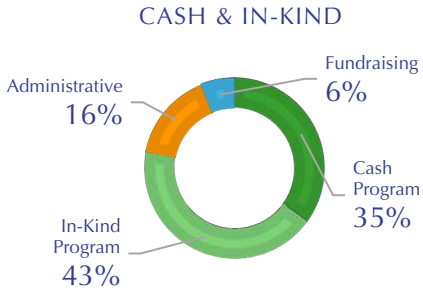
INVESTMENT

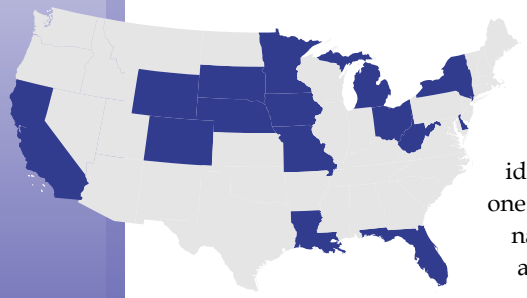
Program: Learning Collaborative	123,387	
Administrative	58,859	
Fundraising	21,446	
Total Cash Expenses		$216,941
In-Kind: Learning Collaborative	153,400	
Total In-Kind Contributions		$153,400
TOTAL INVESTMENT		**$357,091**











Communities of Excellence 2026 (COE 2026) is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization that hosts a learning collaborative of communities across the country, trains communities in the Communities of Excellence Framework, adapted from the Baldrige Framework, and provides opportunities for communities to work together, share successes, challenges, ideas, and best practices, and learn from each other on their performance excellence journey. The organization has only one full-time paid employee and is otherwise operated with the generous contributions of many professionals across the nation. There are 26 communities with populations ranging from 7,500 to 2.8 million in 15 states impacted by COE 2026 and 22 communities currently involved in the National Learning Collaborative.















communities of excellence 2026™

www.coe2026.org