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# communities of excellence 2026™



San Diego South Region and North County San Diego celebrate their Community of Excellence Recognitions during the California Council for Excellence's Celebrating Excellence 2020 Conference. Left to right: Front Row: Muquxi La, Mitsuru Ramirez, Katherine Casabar-Briggs. Back Row: Carey Riccitelli, Stephanie Norling, Tina Emmerick, Allison Boyer. All except Stephanie Norling, Executive Director, Communities of Excellence 2026, are with the San Diego County Health and Human Services Agency.

## Success for Communities of Excellence 2026

by Stephanie Norling, Executive Director, Communities of Excellence 2026



Stephanie Norling,  
Executive Director,  
Communities of  
Excellence 2026

The COVID-19 pandemic has taught us all how important it is to work together. Whether we are dealing with a global health crisis or any of the numerous challenges communities face every day, we know from experience that no single individual, organization, or sector can address the grand challenges our communities face on their own. We accomplish more when we work together.

"The networks, communication channels, and relationships established through our Communities of Excellence (COE) work over the 2½ 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, COE Learning Collaborative Cohort 1 – Excelsior Springs, Missouri*

The events of the past year resulted in significant interruptions to many of the efforts of the 21

communities involved in our National Learning Collaborative. The community leaders participating in our online learning sessions and driving this work in their community excellence groups were the same leaders responding to COVID-19 in their regions. Whether they were involved in public health, safety, economic development, or education, nearly all had to turn their focus to emergency response. Internally, we shifted our efforts and sought to understand how we could best help these leaders while acknowledging and respecting their shift in priorities.

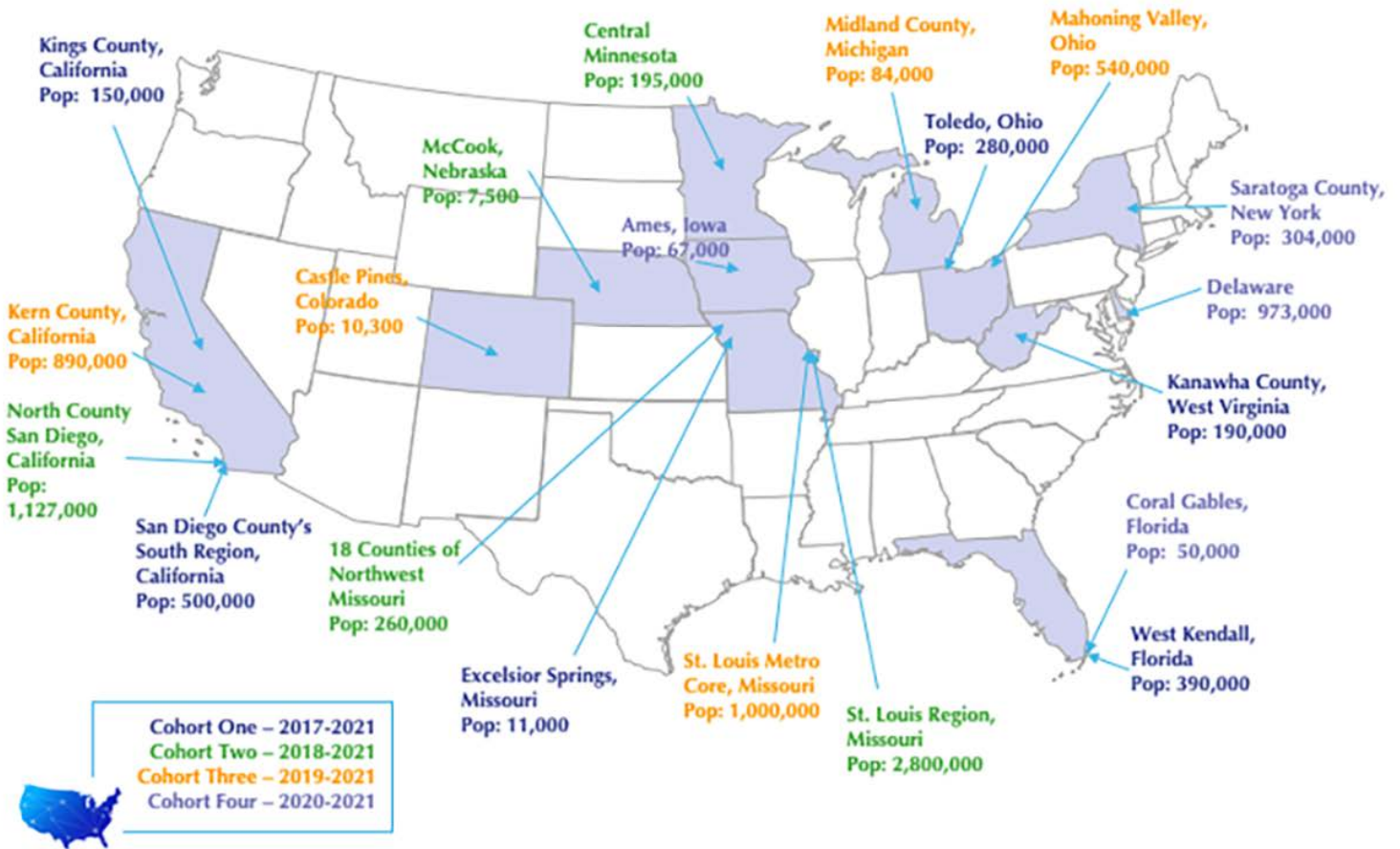
“Communities of Excellence is a top priority. This is when working together has legs, in a crisis like this...This isn’t just something you do when you have time, this is how you solve problems.”

Quentin Wilson, COE Learning Collaborative Cohort 3 – St. Louis Metro Core, Missouri

Instead of continuing with our regular curriculum, which is divided into twice-monthly sessions for our first-year communities and monthly sessions for our second- and third-year communities, we developed twice-monthly online special sessions devoted to topics that could assist leaders through this crisis. We started by using a blog faculty member Harry Hertz wrote called “Lessons for our Times from Two Iconic Leaders,” (also found on page 36 of this *Journal*) discussing the leadership traits and practices that have helped past business leaders weather crises. Subsequent sessions focused on resilience, agility in strategic planning, communication and engagement, self-care, and a discussion about racial equity in response to George Floyd’s killing.

We regularly communicated with the communities and listened to them to determine when it was time to go back to the former curriculum. Even when we did resume in July, there was no “return to normal” for any

# communities of excellence<sup>TM</sup> 2026



of us. Communication and engagement methods had all changed to virtual formats. The definition of “short-term” planning took new meaning and was no longer years or months, but rather weeks or days. Priorities changed within communities: Broadband access and digital literacy, food insecurity, job displacement, and rising unemployment became more immediate challenges to address. Many communities established equity and inclusion task forces to ensure that the work of their community excellence groups reflected the diverse voices and needs of residents across their communities.

Successes included city-wide mask mandates that would not have occurred without the collaboration from community leaders and “adopt-a-classroom” efforts to help teachers and students adapt to their new teaching format. Ultimately, our biggest insight has been that the time spent building relationships and trust with residents and other community leaders, developing leadership structures, roles, and responsibilities that could quickly adapt to changing circumstances, and establishing two-way communication channels, enabled our communities to respond to COVID-19 faster and better than they would have as individual organizations or sectors.

“Our experience using Communities of Excellence and Baldrige-based principles in the community positioned us to naturally approach the COVID-19 pandemic through a collaborative and inclusive lens. Work Groups for all sectors in the community were quickly formed and now communicate weekly through well-attended robust digital sessions, ensuring all stakeholders are current on the latest developments and can get their questions answered. We swiftly and collaboratively moved to protect vulnerable populations, taking steps that have been recognized by the state governor during his daily news conferences. We worked side by side with all our health care community to creatively expand medical capacity well in advance of the expected surge. Our experience with COE and Baldrige has allowed us to collectively and collaboratively ensure our community remains healthy, safe, and thriving.”

*Nick Macchione, Director, County of San Diego Health and Human Services Agency, COE Learning Collaborative Cohort 1 – San Diego South Region and Cohort 2 – San Diego North Regions, California*



North County San Diego receives their “Commitment to Community Excellence” Recognition during a special ceremony at the California Council for Excellence’s Celebrating Excellence 2020 Conference. Left to right: Stephanie Norling, Mitsuru Ramirez, Katherine Casabar-Briggs, Carey Riccitelli, Muquxi La. All except Stephanie Norling, Executive Director, Communities of Excellence 2026, are with the San Diego County Health and Human Services Agency.



“Right after the COVID-19 crisis began, the Chair of our Community Success Panel, which coordinates our Communities of Excellence efforts, called a meeting to bring together City leaders, County leaders, our health system, and pretty much all the major players in our community. We formed a coalition that really came out of Communities of Excellence, that meets twice a week to strategize and work together across the community around this crisis. Communities of Excellence provided a great way for us to get started with this coalition, which is now doing some excellent work.”

*Sharon Mortensen, President and CEO, Midland Area Community Foundation, COE Learning Collaborative Cohort 3 – Midland County, Michigan*



“From Steve Wenger: ‘At the time I submitted this, the caption was, “Who would have thought a picture of a process meeting would be so exciting, until COVID.” Alternatively, “Maximize Northwest Missouri (NWMO)-COE2026 teams gather in Cameron, Missouri to discuss rural community engagement, facilitated by Frank and Kim Spillers of Global Horizon.”’

“The COVID-19 pandemic has taught us all how important it is to work together. Whether we are dealing with a global health crisis or any of the numerous challenges communities face every day, we know from experience that no single individual, organization, or sector can address the grand challenges our communities face on their own. We accomplish more when we work together.”

Throughout the pandemic and into this recovery phase, our work as an organization continued. As of October 2020, 21 communities from 13 different states have adopted the Communities of Excellence Framework. Together they represent a population of almost 10 million people. Other successes include:

- Our first cohort of communities graduated from the Learning Collaborative in September, 2020. All six communities continued their partnership with us and joined our newly formed Alumni Group. The communities continue to participate in quarterly sharing sessions, special trainings, and will soon have their own private online community. They also share their progress, challenges, and successes to our current Learning Collaborative communities during online sessions, and to the public during conference presentations.
- In September, 2020 we released an update to the Communities of Excellence Framework. Starting

- with our first version back in 2013, the framework has undergone four revisions; the last three in partnership with the Baldrige Program and revised based on direct feedback from leaders using the framework in their own communities. Improvements included a focus on diversity, inclusion, equity, resilience, and added detail to the criteria questions in many of the current categories.
- Our virtual 2020 Communities of Excellence Kick-Off Conference was attended by over 150 participants from all 21 participating communities. Highlights included a sharing session from our alumni and a closing presentation from Javier Hernández-Lichtl, CEO of Doctors Hospital in Coral Gables, Florida (COE Year One Community). Javier previously led West Kendall Baptist Hospital, the backbone

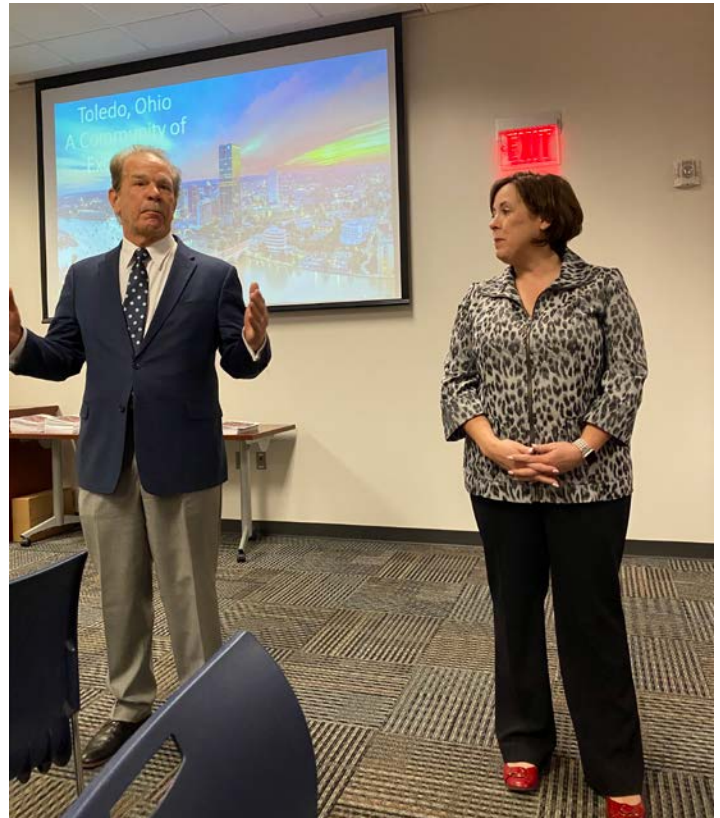


organization for West Kendall, Florida (COE Alumni Community). His message of collaboration and commitment, and his leadership experience, was inspiring.

- Despite a delay in the Assessment and Recognition Program in 2020 by two months due to COVID-19, 13 communities applied across the three levels of the program. And, for the first time, two communities participated in a scoring/judging pilot program that we will expand upon next year. We were overwhelmed with the number of examiners who volunteered. We accepted 61 examiners who spent almost 1,000 volunteer hours reviewing applications and providing feedback. Eight Alliance for Performance Excellence programs assisted us, providing volunteer examiners and leading assessments.
- Volunteers continue to drive the success of the organization. In addition to examiners, 13 mentors assist one or more of our communities, providing additional support beyond the online trainings. Our faculty grows each year; we now have 10 volunteer faculty that determine the curriculum, design, and then lead the online sessions. And finally, our Board continues to provide critical guidance and support.

“In partnership with the Baldrige Enterprise and the communities involved with COE 2026, we are continuing to promote the value of adding “Community” as the seventh category of the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award.”

In partnership with the Baldrige Enterprise and the communities involved with COE 2026, we are continuing to promote the value of adding “Community” as the seventh category of the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award. As the number of communities adopting the COE Framework continues to grow, congressional authorization for this new award category will enable the entire Baldrige Enterprise to expand our capacity to facilitate excellence in communities, formally recognize role-model communities, and share their promising practices. Our federal partners at the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) are supportive of



Randy Oostra, President/CEO of ProMedica Health System, and Angela Brant, President of ProMedica Physicians Group, present during a Communities of Excellence Leadership Meeting in Toledo, Ohio, in February 2020.

the addition and are working with the incoming Biden administration to achieve this goal.

I want to express my gratitude to all those that have supported us on our journey so far including those in the Baldrige Performance Excellence Program, the Baldrige Foundation, the Alliance for Performance Excellence, and the greater Baldrige community. COE 2026 has prospered because of the support of so many, including our faculty: Manuel Castañeda, Gary Floss, Ellen Garshick, Brenda Grant, Kim Halfhill, Harry Hertz, Brian Lassiter, Sandy Potthoff, and Dee Springer, our co-founders Lowell Kruse and Rick Norling, and the entire dedicated Board of Directors.