



communities of excellence 2026



Participants engage in the Community Leadership Q&A at the Communities of Excellence 2026 National Learning Collaborative Annual Conference.

Success for Communities of Excellence 2026 is Good News for Communities Across America

by Stephanie Norling, Executive Director, Communities of Excellence 2026



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It's been nine years since the idea of Communities of Excellence 2026 (COE2026) was conceived. We believed that the Baldrige Framework, which is proven to drive excellence in businesses and organizations, could be adapted to drive excellence in communities. From an initial backyard dinner conversation in 2010, we have experienced tremendous growth.

the success of our country. In addition, our National Learning Collaborative is in its second year. Eight communities have been recognized on their journey to excellence through our recognition and assessment program, and the criteria for community performance excellence has undergone improvements and continues to provide a pathway forward for communities seeking excellence.

“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.”

Fourteen communities have adopted the Communities of Excellence Framework and are demonstrating progress on shared goals around opioid abuse, homelessness, workforce preparedness, and other systemic issues important to

The ultimate goal is described by Brian Lassiter, a member of the COE2026 Board of Directors and of the Learning Collaborative faculty. "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

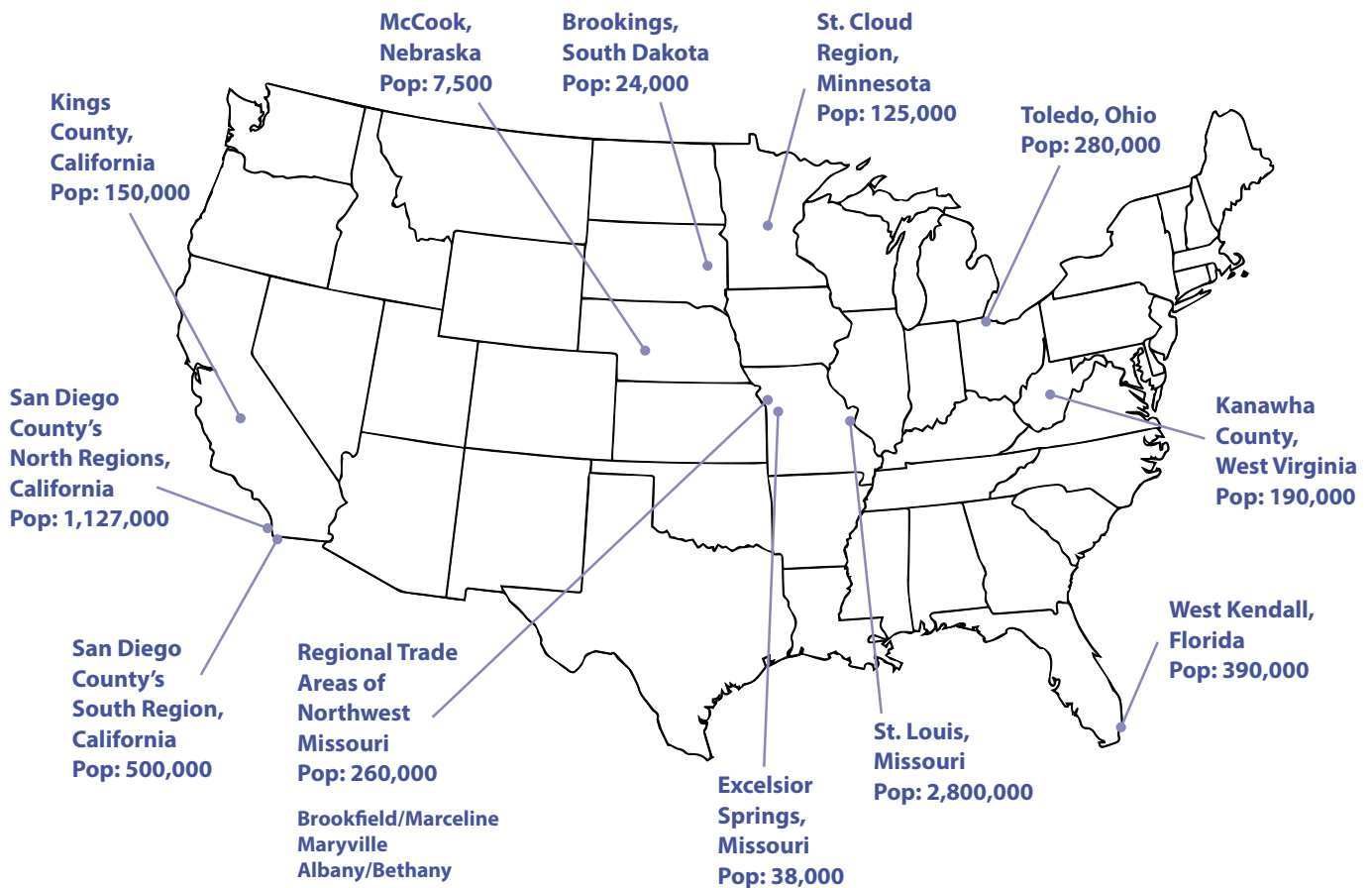
to address community issues or advance community initiatives; use community scorecards to monitor progress of those initiatives and the outcomes they intend to impact; and engage, mobilize, and align people resources—workers, volunteers, and citizenry—on the initiatives that will make a difference in a given community. That's how high performing organizations succeed; we believe that's how high performing communities will succeed."

"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 changes you want to make." – *Nina Plata, Kings County, California*

NATIONAL LEARNING COLLABORATIVE

In September of 2018, nine communities completed their first year of our National Learning Collaborative: A Systematic Approach to Excellence in Communities. During the last two online sessions we heard presentations from the communities outlining their community strategic plans and the progress they'd made on those plans. The progress in just one year

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was incredible. Leaders described shared missions and visions, community values, strategic objectives that aligned with the needs of the community, goals and action plans, and strong, passionate leadership teams focused on the future of their communities.

“Excellence is a choice. A simple conversation between our city government, school district and hospital leadership has developed into a journey to become excellent. With the structure of the Baldrige framework, we are focusing in to discuss solutions to our problems as a community.” – Molly McGovern, Excelsior Springs, Missouri

At the same time, eight of these communities participated in the Communities of Excellence Assessment and Recognition Program. In parallel with Baldrige, the purpose of Communities of Excellence 2026 and the Recognition Program is to 1. develop a nationally recognized standard of community performance excellence, 2. establish role models of that standard through the Recognition Program, and 3. encourage continuous improvement through sharing of best practices and provision of feedback to communities



Julie Russell, Chief Impact Officer for United Way of Greater St. Louis and a member of the COE 2026 St. Louis Community, participates in a Community Profile Learning and Activity session at the 2018-2019 National Learning Collaborative.

on the performance excellence journey that will lead to better outcomes for the residents they serve.

Thirty volunteer examiners reviewed their applications and provided highlights and opportunities for improvement to assist the communities on their journeys. The volunteers consisted of national Baldrige examiners, leaders in the Baldrige state and regional programs, and community leaders both inside and outside of our National Learning Collaborative.

“The COE Framework has helped us understand our strategic advantages, especially in health, education, the economy, and quality of life. 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 didn’t recognize that before, so we’ve now divided our areas of focus by those geographic groups and are approaching them differently based on the needs and characteristics of each area. In addition to thinking about our residents in a new way, we are also thinking about customers beyond our residents. They are employees of businesses in the region, legislators—we are the home of the state capital of West Virginia, we have cultural events that attract people, and we have 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

In October we began a second year of the National Learning Collaborative. In addition to the communities from our first cohort, five new communities started their excellence journeys. They are Brookings, South Dakota, McCook, Nebraska, St. Cloud Region, Minnesota, St. Louis, Missouri, and San Diego North Regions, California. All of the communities met in Denver during the Baldrige Fall Conference for two days of learning, networking, and best practice sharing. In total, 60 people attended the conference from the COE Learning Collaborative cohorts.

Of the many highlights from the conference, one stands out. COE 2026 was invited to present the closing session for the Baldrige Fall Conference. Lowell Kruse, COE 2026 Chair, Becky Cleveland, COE Community Leader from Brookfield, Missouri, Angela Brandt, COE Community Leader from Toledo, Ohio, and Molly Baldrige all shared stories about leadership, collaboration, and the potential of Baldrige and Communities of Excellence 2026 to benefit our nation. In her closing, Molly Baldrige said, "I can't imagine a more difficult undertaking, bringing communities to excellence—nor one that is more important to ourselves personally and to the health of our country."

The second cohort is now taking part in twice-monthly online sessions designed to strengthen community leadership, build their first Baldrige-based Community Profile, and develop community strategic objectives. They have the benefit of not only learning from each other, but also of learning from our first cohort of communities, which have been willing to generously share their experiences with this

group. They are already demonstrating an inspiring commitment to this journey and the hard work it takes to bring communities to excellence.

"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 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*

PROGRESS IN OUR COMMUNITIES

At the same time, the first group of communities is continuing in their second year together. The second year of the Learning Collaborative continues to emphasize community leadership capacity building and sustainability, while also focusing on strategy



COE 2026 provided the closing plenary at the Baldrige Fall Conference in Denver in October 2018. Presenting for COE 2026, from left, Brian Lassiter, President, Performance Excellence Network and COE 2026 Faculty and Board Member; Becky Cleveland, Community Economic Development Coordinator, City of Brookfield, Missouri, COE 2026 Brookfield/Marceline Community; Molly Baldrige, Communities of Excellence 2026 Advisor; Angela Brandt, Chief Operating Officer, ProMedica Physicians, COE 2026 Toledo Community; Lowell C. Kruse, Co-Founder and Chair, Communities of Excellence 2026



deployment and measurement. The communities are learning to systematically prioritize strategies, align resources across their communities, identify gaps in needed areas, and identify the measures and outcomes necessary to know that their strategies are effective.

LOOKING TO THE YEAR 2026

Looking ahead, we will add a third cohort of communities in the Fall of 2019. We will continue to work with our two current cohorts, collectively share best practices, and shine the spotlight on excellence in our communities.

“Healthy West Kendall, a movement that began in 2013 to inspire our community to embrace wellness, is well on its way to achieving its goal. This is thanks to being chosen to participate in the COE2026 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*

On December 11th, 2018, COE 2026 staff and board members traveled to Gaithersburg, Maryland, to request the endorsement and support of the Baldrige Board of Overseers on our effort to have Congress approve Community as the 7th Category of the National Baldrige Quality Award. Our request was unanimously approved. We were very pleased with the support we received from the Overseers as well as the many individual comments expressing their enthusiasm. The next steps will include working with Dr. Walter Copan, Under Secretary of Commerce for Standards and Technology and Director of NIST, and Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross, to move our request through the Congressional approval process.

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



Lowell C. Kruse, Co-Founder and Chair, Communities of Excellence 2026 kicks off the 2018-2019 National Learning Collaborative teambuilding session in October, 2018.

Excellence, and the greater Baldrige community. COE 2026 has prospered because of the support of so many, including our faculty: Manuel Castaneda, Ellen Garshick, Brenda Grant, Harry Hertz, Brian Lassiter, and Sandy Potthoff. In addition, many others volunteer their time and expertise to support our work and it is this kind of advanced citizenship that will help our communities prosper.

“San Diego South Region embarked on the Communities of Excellence journey two years ago, and our demonstrated impact in the community aligned us well to be a pilot 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. The voice of the resident allows us to ensure our residents’ priorities are aligned with the priorities identified by the community leadership team in the areas of chronic disease prevention, economic vitality, and education.” – *Barbara Jiménez, San Diego County, South Region, California*

Helping communities improve their performance is the best way to improve America. We appreciate the willingness of these first fourteen communities to pave the way for others who will be involved in this important work in the years ahead.