

communities of excellenceTM 2026


Improving Economic Vitality, Health,
Education, and Quality of Life
in America One Community
at a Time

DECEMBER 2020



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 would happen if people from many sectors agreed on one vision and committed to working together on shared priorities 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;
- **Prioritize** what to work on first and **define** a shared community vision;
- **Access** trusted data to **gain** a deeper understanding of the priorities;
- **Plan** how to best (re)allocate resources of people, time, finances, and energy through alignment, engagement, and mobilization;
- **Implement** strategies to address and advance the community's priority projects and initiatives will make a difference;
- **Monitor** progress of those issues, projects, and initiatives tracking output activities and outcome impact;
- 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 economic vitality, educational attainment, health and well-being, and overall quality of life.**

Our Past, Present, and Future

Welcome to this presentation of a bold idea that is gaining traction coast-to-coast 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.

How? By having a support system in place that integrates innovation and action across sectors and geo-political lines through a proven set of strategic leadership and management tools focused on the continuous pursuit of quality and excellence. We look forward to sharing more of our story and learning 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 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



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.

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 poverty³ 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/17.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 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.

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.

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.**

“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).



The ratio of the Baldrige Program's benefits for the U.S. economy to its costs is estimated at 820 to 1.

2010–2019 award applicants represent **650,093 jobs**, 3,209 work sites, over \$181 billion in revenue/budgets, and over 590 million customers served.

121 Baldrige Award winners serve as national role models.

348 Baldrige examiners volunteered roughly **\$7.8 million** in services in 2019.

State Baldrige-based examiners volunteered around **\$29 million** in services in 2018.

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/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.

As of the end of 2020, **more than 1,700 organizations have applied for the national Baldrige Award, and tens of thousands have applied to state, regional, and sector-specific programs. A total of 129 Baldrige Awards have been earned by 31 large manufacturers, 29 small businesses, 27 healthcare organizations, 16 large service organizations, 14 education organizations, and 12 nonprofit or government organizations.**¹

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.”

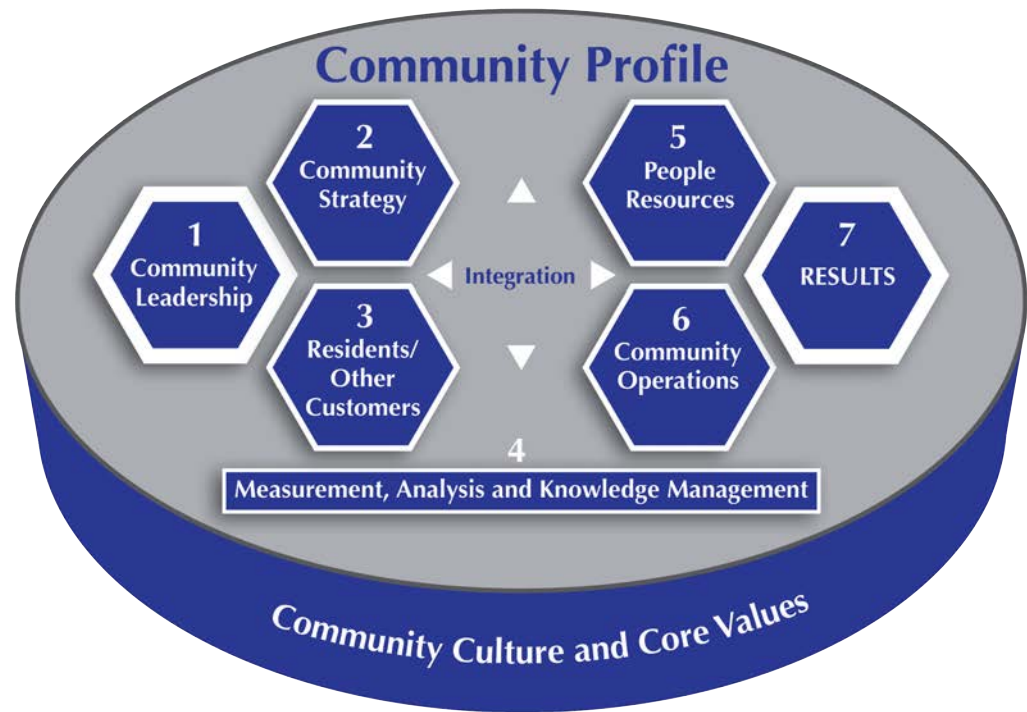
—Nina Plata, Kings County, California

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 excellence²⁰²⁶ 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/baldrige>. - 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:

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.

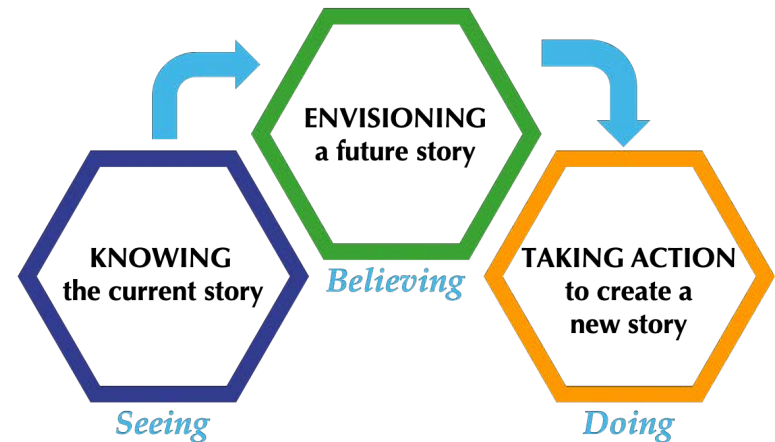
Envisioning a future story – Understanding and trusting the data to guide decision-making and determining a shared vision and priorities.

- ✓ 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.

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."

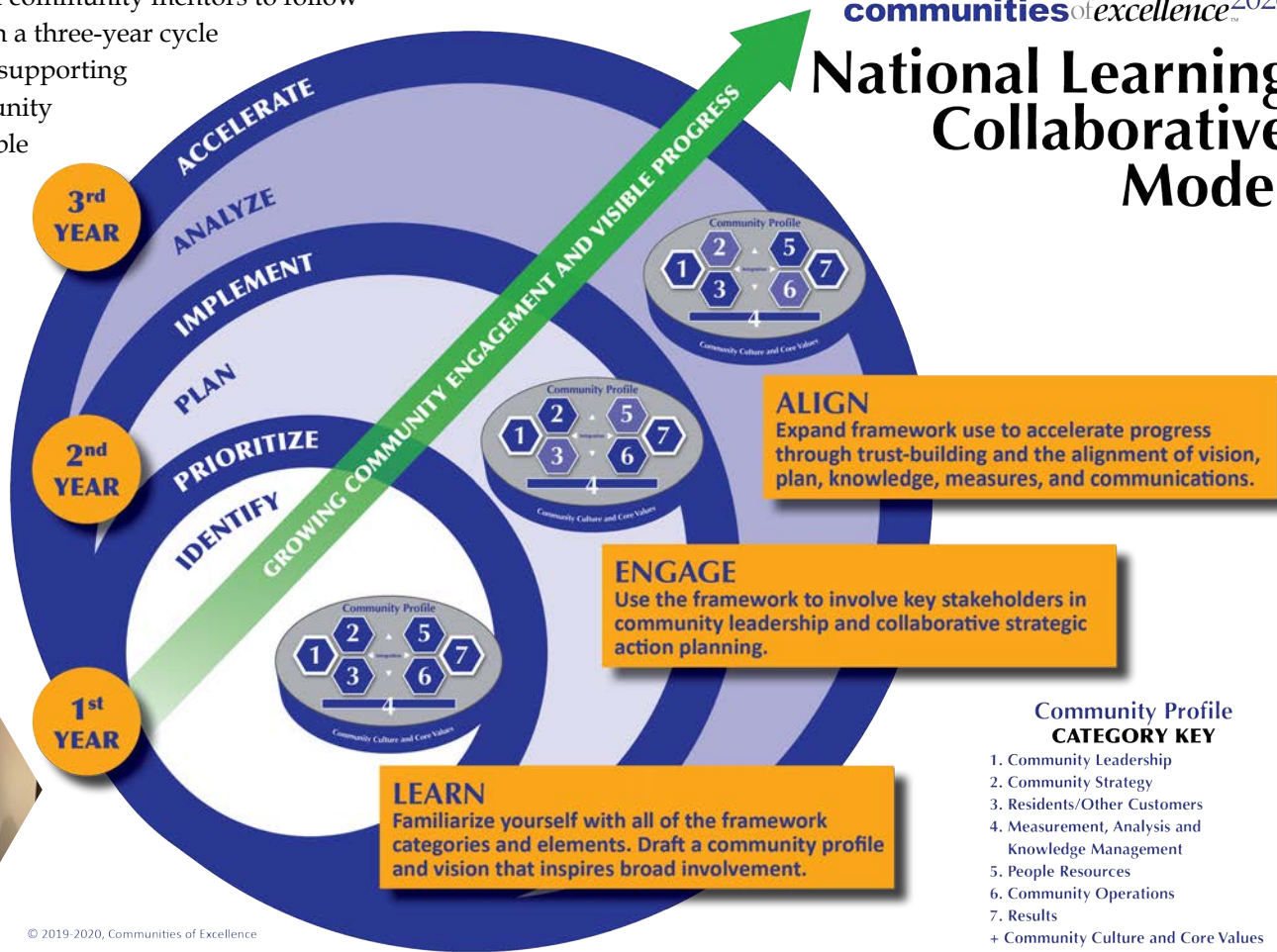
— Steve Wenger, Northwest Missouri Rural Region

Supporting Community Leaders from Envisioning to Implementation

Now in its fourth 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, the first cohort to have completed the Collaborative are the founding members of the COE 2026 alumni network.

communities of excellence²⁰²⁶

National Learning Collaborative Model



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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.

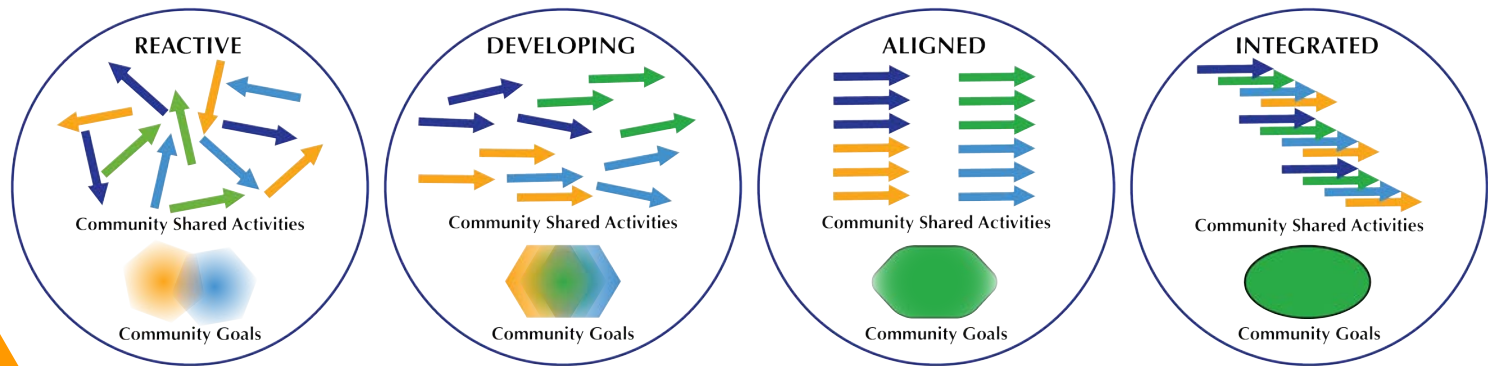


Moving from Reactive Activities to Results-Oriented Processes

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 2020:

- ✓ Involvement of **21 communities** ranging from 7,500 to 2.8 million people representing a combined **population of 10 million** whose leaders are involved in our three-year National Learning Collaborative. With these communities, our message has reached **over 420 organizations** representing all sectors of the economy.
- ✓ Our first cohort of six communities has 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 three years sharing successes, challenges, ideas, and their best practices discovered on their community performance excellence journeys.
- ✓ Our evolution – the fourth revision to the Communities of Excellence Framework was completed in 2020.
 - ✓ In partnership with the Alliance for Performance Excellence and their Baldrige Fall Conference, our annual conference attendance continues to grow, from 46 attendees in 2017 to 80 in 2019 one day in Nashville, and 102 online for our 2020 virtual gathering. COE 2026 attendees spend together as a kick-off to the Learning Collaborative, and one day attending the sessions at the Baldrige Fall Conference.
- ✓ An independent evaluation was completed by The University of San Diego's Nonprofit Institute reporting evidence that communities participating in our pilot:
 - Are satisfied and appreciate Communities of Excellence, the Framework, and the support and guidance of Baldrige experts who act as instructors, mentors, and coaches
 - Identify important key issues for their community
 - Are identifying and strengthening backbone organizations
 - Are held accountable to move work forward
 - Learn 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 relationships that did not previously exist
 - Increase their cross-sector engagement and collaboration



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- ✓ In 2020, 13 communities submitted applications for our Assessment and Recognition Program. For the first time three of those applications responded to the entire Communities of Excellence Criteria to pilot the scoring and judging process, which is currently our top-level assessment opportunity.
- ✓ A dedicated team of staff and volunteers including 10 professional faculty volunteers make the Communities of Excellence 2026 National Learning Collaborative possible, and 64 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. Also, a few members of the first cohort have shared reflections on the experience in their own words.

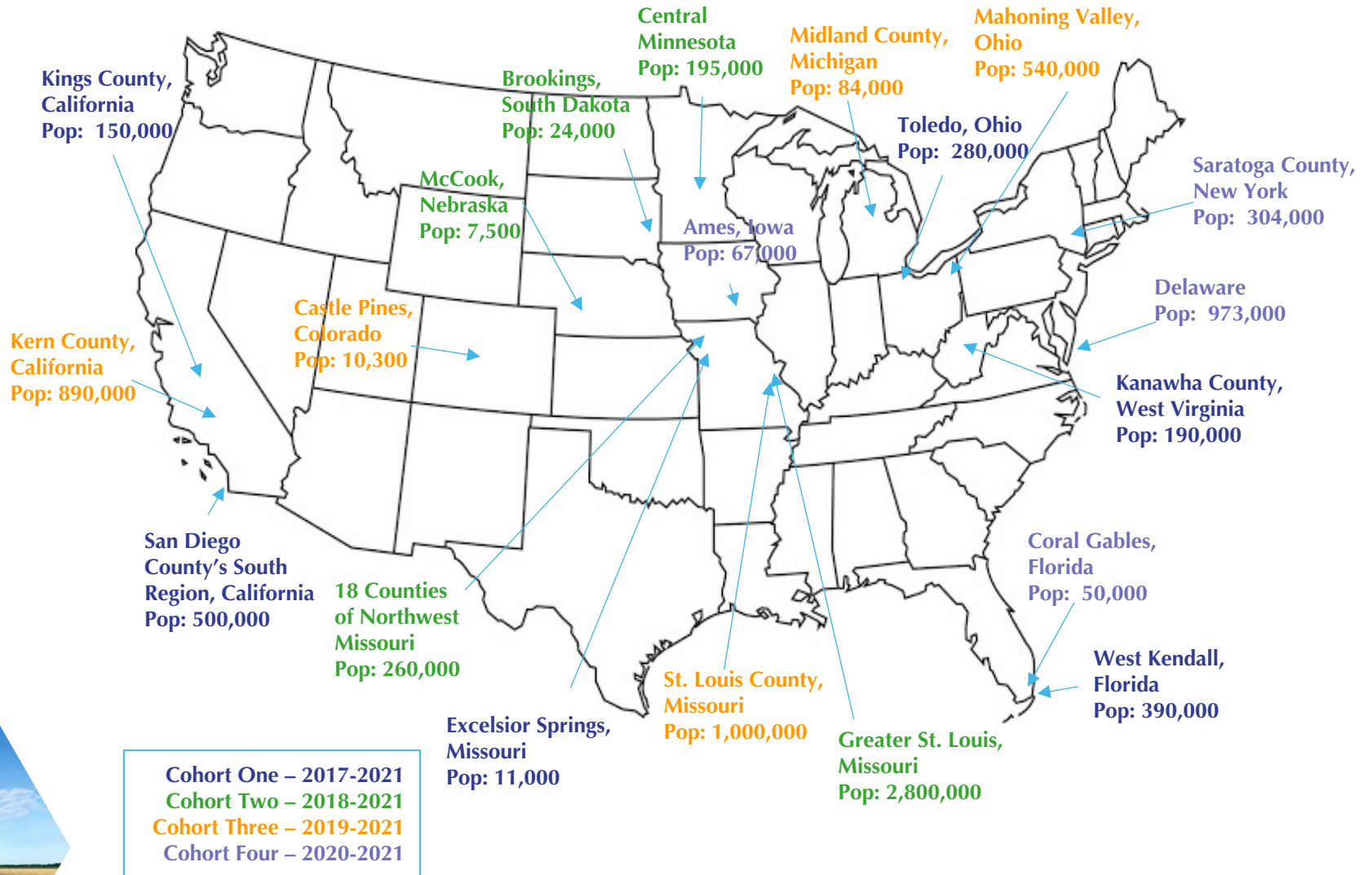


“We hope to elevate the assessment and recognition part of our work to become the seventh category of the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award designated by Congress and coordinated through the U.S. Department of Commerce’s [DOC] National Institute of Standards and Technology [NIST].
We strongly believe 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 Participating in Our Pilot: Examples of the Community Excellence Framework in Action



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

As of December 2020, there are 21 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:

Kern County, California

(Boundless Kern County)

Population: 890,000

Convening organization: Adventist Health Bakersfield

Partner sectors: Under development

Kings County, California

(Flourish Kings County)

Population: 150,000

Convening organization: Kings Partnership for Prevention

Partner sectors: Health care, education, faith community, government, nonprofit

San Diego County, North Regions, California

(Live Well San Diego North County)

Population: 1.127 million

Convening organization: Health & Human Services Agency, County of San Diego

Partner sectors: Education, government, faith community, health care, 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

Castle Pines, Colorado

Population: 10,360

Convening organization: City of Castle Pines

Partner sectors: Under development

The State of Delaware

Population: 973,000

Convening organization: State Division of Libraries

Partner sectors: Under development

Coral Gables, Florida

Population: 50,000

Convening organization: Doctor's Hospital/Chamber of Commerce

Partner sectors: Health care, business

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

Ames, Iowa

Population: 67,000

Convening organization: Mary Greeley Medical Center

Partner sectors: Health care, nonprofit, business

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Central Minnesota Region

Population: 195,000

Convening organization: CentraCare Health

Partner sectors: Business, education, health care, nonprofit

Greater St. Louis Region, Missouri

Population: 2.8 million

Convening organization: United Way of Greater St Louis

Partner sectors: Nonprofit, faith community

Northwest Missouri Rural Region

(Maximize NWMO)

Population: 260,000

Convening organization: Community Foundation of Northwest Missouri

Partner sectors: Business, education, health care, nonprofit, government

Excelsior Springs, Missouri

Population: 11,000

Convening organization: City of Excelsior Springs

Partner sectors: Education, government, health care, nonprofit

St. Louis County, Missouri

Population: 990,000

Convening organization: St Louis Metro Core, Mid-America Transplant

Partner sectors: Business, government, nonprofit

McCook, Nebraska

Population: 7,500

Convening organization: Community Hospital

Partner sectors: Business, education, faith community, health care

Saratoga County, New York

Population: 304,000

Convening organization: Saratoga Hospital/Public Health Department

Partner sectors: Government, health care

City of Toledo, Ohio

Population: 280,000

Convening organization: ProMedica

Partner sectors: Business, education, government, health care, nonprofit

Mahoning Valley, Ohio

Population: 542,000

Convening organization: Eastgate Regional Council of Governments

Partner sectors: Education, nonprofit, government, health care

Brookings, South Dakota

Population: 24,000

Convening organization: Brookings Community Institute

Partner sectors: Business, education, government, health care

Midland County, Michigan

Population: 84,000

Convening Organization: Midland Area Community Foundation

Partner sectors: Business and nonprofit

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



Responding to Their Community's Changing Needs

San Diego County, South Region, California

“Since embarking on the COE journey three years ago, San Diego South Region has made great efforts in refining our strategic planning processes and developing action plans that benefit the community. The South Region Leadership Team convened workgroups, which have made tremendous strides in the areas of chronic disease prevention, economic vitality, and education. This includes:

- Coordinating and convening a vaping forum with community leaders in cities, healthcare, and schools to inform and collaborate on ways to decrease vaping;
- Working with policymakers to change four smoking ordinances to eliminate smoking in public places;
- Developing and implementing a program called ‘I’m Ready’ to address economic disparities in the community for unemployed or underemployed youth ages 18-24 empowering them with skills to access jobs in the local economy; and,
- Developing a systematic process so the ‘I’m Ready’ program can be replicated and scaled.

Additionally, the leadership team developed and implemented a new partner orientation for those joining the South Region Leadership Team.

Looking ahead, the South Region Leadership Team will continue to strengthen partner collaborations in the area of education and has recently partnered with San Diego State University on a Capstone project to establish surveys and modes of communication to capture the voice of the resident. **San Diego South Region is excited to continue the COE journey and furthering the Live Well San Diego vision of healthy, safe, and thriving communities!**

“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



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



Expanding Perspectives to Improve Health

West Kendall, Florida


“Healthy West Kendall was recently 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 looking to design and implement a buy local campaign as one of the recommendations from the study. We will be adding new economic metrics to the Healthy West Kendall dashboard as well as an evaluation tool.

Although we have not launched our Safety driver, we partnered with FDOT (Florida Department of Transportation) and installed a non-motorized counter. This counter is to count pedestrian and cyclist traffic in order to understand how to improve safety measures in the vicinity.

After much discussion, we are aligning the education goals to better match our economic efforts. We will be creating an education resource guide as well as helping to bridge the employment gap. With the help and support of our local United Way, this year, we will also be creating ‘Healthy West Kendall Ethical guidelines.’


After an exercise and reflection at the COE/Baldrige Conference, we have re-written our 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.



“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



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 18 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 Acceleration¹ 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: 858.342.8185

Stephanie Norling, COE 2026 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

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Brenda Grant

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President, Performance Excellence Network, Minneapolis, Minnesota

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Diane (Dee) Springer

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



Insightful Mentors Serving Our Pilot Communities

COE 2026 Community Mentors

COHORT 1

Adam Cohen

Executive Director, Denver Active 20-30 Children's Foundation
Mentor Communities: West Kendall, Florida and Kanawha County, West Virginia

Brian Lassiter

President, Performance Excellence Network
Mentor Communities: Kings County, CA and Excelsior Springs, Missouri

Stephanie Norling

Director, Communities of Excellence 2026
Mentor Community: San Diego South Region, California

Lowell Kruse

Chair and Co-Founder, Communities of Excellence 2026
Mentor Community: Toledo, Ohio

COHORT 2

Jeff Lucas

Director, Be Safe Performance Improvement, University of Virginia Health System
Mentor Community: McCook, Nebraska

Lisa Tabor

Principal, CultureBrokers
Mentor Community: Greater St. Louis, Missouri

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

Stephanie Norling

Director, Communities of Excellence 2026
Mentor Community: San Diego North Regions, California

COHORT 3

Kim Halfhill

Principal, KH Consulting
Mentor Community: Castle Pines, Colorado

Geri Markley

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

Margot Hoffman

President and CEO, The Partnership for Excellence
Mentor Community: Mahoning Valley, Ohio

Manuel G. Castañeda

Chief, Agency Operations, County of San Diego, Health and Human Services
Agency Central and South Regions
Mentor Community: Kern County, California

Diane Brockmeier

President and CEO, Mid-America Transplant
Mentor Community: St. Louis County, Missouri

COHORT 4

Manuel G. Castañeda

Chief, Agency Operations, County of San Diego, Health and Human Services
Agency Central and South Regions
Mentor Community: Coral Gables, Florida

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

Lowell Kruse

Chair and Co-Founder, Communities of Excellence 2026
Mentor Community: The State of Delaware

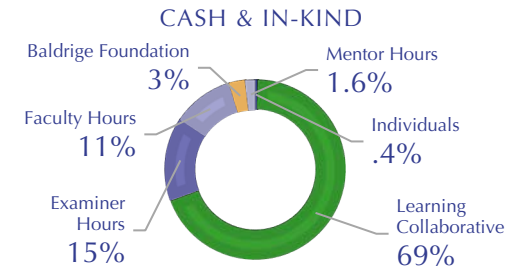
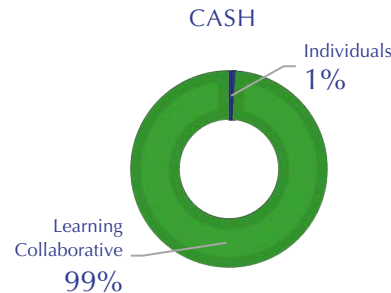


Leveraging Investments and Collective Intellect for Impact

Fiscal Year 2020 Annual Report

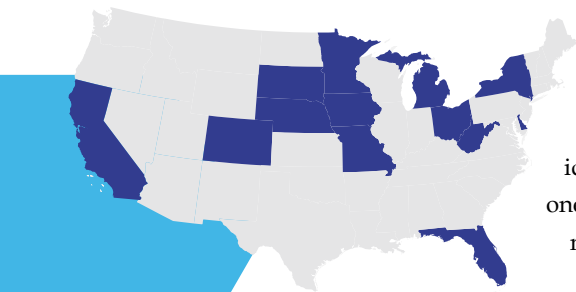
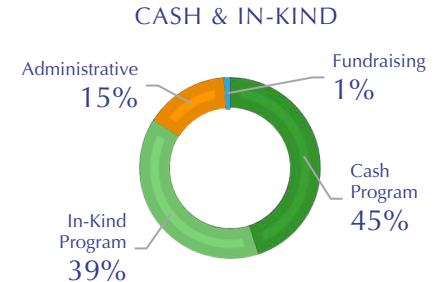
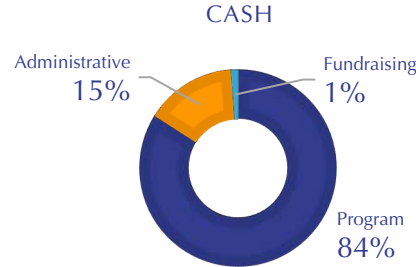
REVENUE

● Donations: Individuals	1,400	
● Donations: Organizations	0	
● Earned: Learning Collaborative	254,455	
Total Cash Income		\$255,855
● In-Kind: Examiner Hours	55,250	
● In-Kind: Faculty Hours	42,000	
● In-Kind: Baldrige Foundation	10,000	
● In-Kind: Mentor Hours	6,000	
Total In-Kind Contributions		\$113,250
TOTAL REVENUE		\$369,105



INVESTMENT

● Program: Learning Collaborative	242,145	
● Cash	128,895	
● In-Kind	113,250	
● Administrative	43,924	
● Fundraising	2,473	
Total Cash Expenses		\$216,941
TOTAL INVESTMENT		\$288,542



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 currently 21 communities with populations ranging from 7,500 to 2.8 million in 13 states involved in the Learning Collaborative.

