

Communities of Excellence Newsletter Winter Edition



Message from Stephanie

*Stephanie Norling, President/CEO,
Communities of Excellence 2026*

The Year in Review and What's Coming Next

As we welcome the new year, I am filled with pride and appreciation for all we have accomplished together in 2024. It was a transformative year for Communities of Excellence 2026, marked by new opportunities and new partnerships. Your continued support has made these achievements possible, and I am thrilled to share some highlights:

Empowering Communities Through Knowledge: We began building a Learning Management System and Knowledge Management Portal that will enable us to provide accessible, on-demand resources and training for communities nationwide.

Data-Driven Decision-Making: The launch of our digital Common Community Scorecard has empowered communities to track their performance against key metrics, enabling informed, impactful decisions. Organizations and communities can customize their dashboards down to the zip code level, adding their own prioritized metrics to the 25 metrics already accessible in the scorecard.

New Opportunities for Collaboration: This year saw the introduction of several new programs, including the Building Strong Teams for CollaborACTION course. Designed to foster meaningful collaboration, this program equips participants with the skills and tools to address shared priorities effectively. We have even more programs under development, including the Social Impact Accelerator and Community Coach Training.

Expanding Our Reach: Our communications strategy grew significantly, with impactful presentations across the country and the launch of our Instagram account. Keep an eye out for more webinars this year.

In this Issue:

A Look at the COE Fall Conference: Enjoy a collage of photos from our Awards Reception and a recap of the event. If you weren't able to join us this year, we hope to see you next year in Denver!

Introducing our newest online course: Building Strong Teams for CollaborACTION: Join us for this six-week online course that will provide you with the tools and skills to build and sustain a high-impact, multi-sector team. This first session is February 19th.

Leadership Spotlight: Dr. Renee Rodriguez-Goodemote: As a dedicated leader in the Saratoga County Communities of Excellence (COE) initiative, Renee shares her journey, the challenges and rewards of fostering cross-sector collaboration, and the impact of the COE Framework on addressing critical community challenges.

Learn more about our new Teams Program and other exciting opportunities by visiting our website: www.communitiesofexcellence2026.org.



Above: COE Board and Faculty member Sandy Potthoff celebrates with a COE award recipient at the 2024 Fall Conference in Coral Gables, Florida.

Building Strong Partnerships: We partnered with organizations like the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy and Claremont Lincoln University, amplifying our shared commitment to vibrant communities.

Recognizing Excellence: We celebrated 11 communities through our Assessment and Recognition Program, including a record-high four Silver and two Bronze Level recipients. The Founders Fund and Founders Award were also launched, raising over \$111,000 to support community educational programs.

Looking ahead, we are excited to continue this momentum into 2025. We are continuing with our flagship program, the National Learning Collaborative, but we also understand that communities have different capacities to take on this work and require different onramps for getting involved.

We've worked hard to develop new programs that can meet any community where it's at in its journey to address disparities. Whether you are prioritizing team building and cross-sector collaboration, coaching, or you want to see a greater impact on your current collaborative efforts, we want to support you.

Our newest foundational course, Building Strong Teams for CollaborACTION, begins in February. This six-week program will guide participants in creating effective cross-sector teams, drafting engagement plans, and developing actionable strategies to achieve community goals. I encourage you to join us and share this opportunity widely.

Keep an eye out this year for more programs, special webinars, and the launch of our Learning Management System. These were all created based on feedback from our stakeholders and will provide many opportunities to learn, collaborate, act, share successes, and go on this journey with others to build stronger, more vibrant communities.

Together, we are creating a movement that is improving the quality of life for communities across the nation. Thank you for being an essential part of this journey. Your dedication and enthusiasm inspire us every day.

Thank you for your ongoing support and dedication.

Stephanie Norling

President/CEO



Left to right: COE Chair Angela Brandt and President/CEO Stephanie Norling listen intently as co-founders Lowell Kruse and Rick Norling deliver remarks after receiving the inaugural Founders Award.



COE FALL
CONFERENCE
2024

THE 2024 FALL CONFERENCE

The 2024 Conference was our best conference yet, and the survey results confirm it! 100% of survey respondents said they would recommend this conference to others.

The Housing and Economic Development Workshop on day 1 was a particular success. The workshop included a presentation from George “Mac” McCarthy, President of the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy called “Who Owns America”. After Mac’s presentation we heard from a panel of housing experts in Miami-Dade County followed by interactive roundtable discussions of housing issues ranging from resilience to the rural housing perspective.

This conference wouldn’t have been as successful without the support of our amazing sponsors! We are so appreciative of their support.



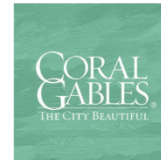
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Building Strong Teams for CollaborACTION

A LEARNING COURSE FROM
communities of excellence 2026

Learn how to effectively and meaningfully collaborate with other leaders in your community to achieve meaningful change.

Here’s what you’ll learn:

- How to form an effective team of partners from different organizations or different sectors to tackle shared priorities.
- Simple, evidence-based practices for your team's structure and roles, as well as how you'll communicate, make decisions, and start working together on your shared priorities.
- Skills and proven strategies used by current Communities of Excellence community leaders to agree on your team's "why" and keep your team motivated and focused.

Dates and Time: Wednesdays, February 19 – March 26, 2025, 2:00 – 4:00 p.m. CT

Location: Online

Cost: \$465 per person (10% discount for COE members and teams of 3 or more.)

What you’ll take away by the end:

- A digital guidebook full of practical tools and resources to help your team succeed.
- A first draft of an Engagement Plan defining your "why," "who," and "how."
- An outline for a compelling pitch deck to inspire others to join your team.
- A team readiness assessment tool to measure your team’s progress and improve your impact.

Looking to keep your team energized and moving forward? This course is the perfect first step on your Communities of Excellence journey and a gateway to joining our [National Learning Collaborative](#).

LEADERSHIP SPOTLIGHT

*Renee Rodriguez-Goodemote, MD, FAAFP
Medical Director Saratoga Community Health Center*

For our first Leadership Spotlight since we started this newsletter, we are thrilled to feature Renee Rodriguez-Goodemote, a family physician and medical director of the Saratoga Community Health Center in Saratoga Springs, New York. Renee will receive the Baldrige Foundation's Leadership Excellence Award for the Community Sector this year during an awards ceremony at the Baldrige Program's Quest for Excellence Conference in April.

Can you share a little about your background and what led you to take on a leadership role in the Saratoga County Communities of Excellence effort?

I am a family physician and medical director of the Saratoga Community Health Center in Saratoga Springs, NY. Our community health center is mission driven to provide care to anyone, independent of ability to pay. We started participating in the Saratoga Hospital community needs assessment due to our community medicine model. We realized that true community health requires a shared understanding of the drivers of health equity and a shared framework for community action. We did not want our community needs assessment to just be a required activity we wanted it to help drive community collaboration. As a physician leader, I feel obligated to leverage my position to elevate the stories of those I serve. Our Saratoga County "Thrive Together" Community of Excellence vision is a county where every resident can live well, be well and thrive. The framework enables us to address health through building trusting and collaborative relationships with community partners.

Why do you think cross-sector community leadership is essential for driving positive change, and what role does it play in Saratoga County's efforts?

Cross sector community leadership is essential for collaborative efforts to endure. We have health equities focus and many of the obstacles impacting health are not related to physical health. The framework really prompts

communities to consider economic, education, and quality of life drivers as well as health. One of the most valuable things that I have observed in our community of excellence group is the fact that our participating organizations represent varying sectors, and they continue to attend even when leadership changes in their organization. I think participation is valued because it provides us with a productive way to align and magnify our efforts.

What have been some of the biggest challenges and rewards of leading this initiative?

One of the biggest challenges has been time. We are all tasked with individual organizational tasks. One of the largest challenges that we have had to address is the notion that COE work is not "in addition to" usual workplace activities. COE is "a part of" what each of our organizations do. One reward from our work together is our annual Impact Sector summit. This started in 2023 and is led by our COE participating organizations. We convene varied sectors and tackle difficult topics like homelessness, transportation and mental health. We have enough trust to openly dialogue as a community. These annual summits have helped to introduce the COE Framework as our structured approach for community design thinking and collaborative action.

"Communities of Excellence is not "in addition to" usual workplace activities...[it] is "a part of" what each of our organizations do."

How has the Communities of Excellence Framework influenced the way Saratoga County collaborates and addresses its key challenges?

The framework has been effective in getting community partners to learn from each other. No single organization has the resources or capacity to improve complex problems such as homelessness or food security. One of the most valuable aspects of the framework has been the prompting questions in each of the categories. These categories provide subjects for consideration and discussion which ultimately lay the groundwork for capacity building.

Can you provide an example of a significant outcome or success story from this effort?

One example of a success is our work in transportation initially supported though funding from our United Way. They were one of our first foundations who granted funds to address a community problem, not programs. The funding supported the operational needs of implementing the framework. Subsequently, our transportation taskforce has been effective in increasing public transportation routes, adding a pilot scooter program and engaging one of our largest employers in helping to fund transportation options for employees. These early multi-sectoral successes are the result of valuing a shared community vision, community capacity building and community leadership.

What lessons have you learned about fostering cross-sector collaboration and engaging stakeholders?

One essential lesson is *going slow in order to go fast*. Trust building cannot be rushed. The speed of our work needs to go at the pace of engagement. True engagement takes time by listening and understanding varying perspectives. Even though our community of excellence has a health equity focus, many of our participants represent non healthcare related sectors. Many times community solutions require us to leave our organizational mental models to come together and be brave enough to innovate together.

Are there any insights or strategies you would share with other community leaders looking to drive excellence in their communities?

Listen and learn first, then you can think together for solutions. Community leadership requires some bravery in openly discussing community problems and seeking opportunities for capacity building for collective action. COE's learning collaborative and framework allows us to be brave together.

What are your hopes for the future of Saratoga County's Communities of Excellence effort?

My hope for the future of our community of excellence is that the processes and collaborative thinking will become even more integrated into organizations within varied sectors. This integration will keep us poised to be agile as a community and better able to address community challenges.

How do you see the role of community leadership evolving in the next five years?

The beauty of the learning collaborative is that I have been able to see varied approaches for community leadership. Leaning upon our COE network allows us to learn from others and this sparks new approaches within our community. Leading has many forms. When we started much of the work was fueled by the backbone. Now our backbone leadership has shifted to providing facilitation for innovation and much of the action is led by community partners. I anticipate that this will provide a more diversified approach for leadership in the next five years.

What would you like to share with readers about the importance of getting involved in their communities?

The Baldrige Framework has proven effective in improving systems in organizations. There is tremendous opportunity in sharing the framework on a community level. When strategic objectives are aligned with community priorities, all residents have opportunities to live well, be well and thrive.