

# communities of excellence 2026™

## Jumpstart Your Journey

Thursday, April 21<sup>st</sup> and Friday, April 22<sup>nd</sup>

Elms Hotel and Spa, Excelsior Springs, Missouri

### DAY ONE – THURSDAY APRIL 21<sup>st</sup>

7:30 - 8:15 am	<b>Registration and Breakfast</b>
8:15 – 8:35 am	<b>Welcome and Introductions</b> <i>Stephanie Norling, Executive Director/Mentor, San Diego, CA</i>
8:35 – 9:30 am	<b>Crossroads of America</b> <i>Where We've Been and Where We're Headed</i> <i>Lowell Kruse, Chair and Co-Founder/Mentor, St Joseph, MO</i>  Since 2015 community leaders from across the country have joined the Communities of Excellence (COE) National Learning Collaborative with the goal of using the Baldrige-based Communities of Excellence Framework to support their communities in identifying and measuring key initiatives to address community wellbeing. Chair and Co-Founder Lowell Kruse will kick-off our conference by sharing his experience leading his former healthcare organization to the National Baldrige Quality Award and how this experience led to the development of COE 2026. Later, Executive Director Stephanie Norling will share where we're headed, including the plans for new offerings and tools to support communities as part of our new 5-year strategy.
9:30 – 10:00 am	<b>Are We There Yet?</b> <i>Introduction to the Communities of Excellence Dashboard and How to Use It</i> <i>Kim Halfhill, Faculty/Mentor, Excelsior Springs, MO</i>  Are we there yet? This question has been around as long as travel has existed! Does your community excellence group know how to answer this age-old question? The right metrics can help you determine if you've reached your destination or if you're even making progress. In this session, we will introduce you to the new Communities of Excellence Dashboard and discuss how your community can use it. Whether your community is still working to identify data sources or has already determined key metrics, our new dashboard is a powerful tool to support your community excellence journey. Come learn more!
10:00 – 10:20 am	<i>Been Driving All Day - Need a Brake</i>

	<b>National Learning Collaborative Participants</b>	<b>General Participants</b>
10:20 – 10:50 am	<p><b>Going the Extra Mile to (Re)Engage your Volunteers and Partners</b>  <i>Kim Halfhill, Faculty/Mentor, Excelsior Springs, MO</i></p> <p>The volunteers and partners who give their time and skills to your community excellence efforts are an invaluable part of its success. However, it can be difficult to attract, inspire, and keep the volunteers you need. This session will explore the challenges leaders face in working with volunteers and provide a practical approach to addressing them.</p>	<p><b>Starting your Journey to Community Performance Excellence</b>  <i>The Why and How of Forming a Community Excellence Group</i>  Interactive Presentation and Table Activities  <i>Christel Gollnick, Faculty/Mentor, Trimble, MO</i>  <i>Stephanie Norling, Executive Director/Mentor, San Diego, CA</i></p> <p>There is no chief executive officer in a community, but there are many people engaged in the leadership of its core areas of education, economics, health, and quality of life who, together, serve the same function as a CEO. Why is thinking about community leadership differently valuable? In this session, we'll discuss this question with existing and newly forming groups alike as we introduce promising practices for how to take the spark of interest in collaboration and performance improvement to the next level with the Communities of Excellence Framework. We will also cover different leadership structures, resident engagement techniques, and decision-making methods that can help everyone involved see, believe, and do more. Join us and take away some valuable tips that can be used immediately to help move your shared priorities forward and follow-through on plans and great intentions.</p>
10:55 – 12:15 pm	<p><b>Looking in the Rearview Mirror – What We've Learned So Far</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Leadership</i></li> <li>• <i>Strategy</i></li> <li>• <i>Communication</i></li> </ul> <p>Promising Practice Presentations and Table Activities</p> <p>One of the benefits of the National Learning Collaborative is learning from each other! In this session we will hear examples of promising practices from three community leaders. After short presentations, participants will divide into smaller groups to continue discussing how these practices were developed and share your own successes in these areas. We will rotate tables three times so that everyone has a chance to participate in each area.</p>	
12:15 – 1:15 pm	<i>Lunch and Refueling Time</i>	
1:15 - 2:15 pm	<p><b>No Road is Long with Good Company - The Thrive Excelsior Journey</b>  Panel Presentation  <i>Thrive Excelsior Steering Committee and Task Force Members, Excelsior Springs, MO</i></p> <p>Five years ago, a small group of community leaders and residents set out on a journey to transform their community using the Communities of Excellence Framework as their guide. The road has been long and sometimes rocky, but today the community excellence group, now known as Thrive Excelsior, has grown to a group of nearly forty working to improve the quality of life and increase the life expectancy in Excelsior Springs. In 2021, Thrive Excelsior became the first community in the nation to receive silver recognition through the Communities of Excellence Assessment and Recognition Program. Join us for a conversation about our journey so far, the lessons we've learned, and where we're headed next.</p>	
2:15 – 2:30pm	<i>Been Driving All Day - Need a Brake</i>	

	National Learning Collaborative Participants		General Participants
2:30 – 3:45 pm	<p><b>Road Trip Conversations</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Funding your Community Excellence Journey</i></li> <li>• <i>Continuity Planning</i></li> <li>• <i>Using Data to Drive Resident/Stakeholder Engagement</i></li> </ul> <p>Presentations and Table Activity</p> <p>Some aspects of performance excellence are more challenging than others. For this session we will take a deep dive into 3 topics that communities struggle with. After short presentations, participants will divide into smaller groups to continue discussing their successes and challenges in these areas. Instead of rotating, participants will focus on just one topic for the table activity.</p>	<p><b>Mapping your Journey – Writing your Communities of Excellence Application</b></p> <p>Interactive Presentation</p> <p><i>Brian Lassiter, Faculty/Board/Mentor, Minneapolis, MN</i></p> <p><i>Brenda Grant, Faculty, Southside, WV</i></p> <p>This session will help you understand both why it's important to document your Community Excellence journey and how to effectively write a Communities of Excellence application in order to maximize your time and receive the best possible feedback report. This session is best suited for individuals planning to write the COE application for your community.</p>	<p><b>Introduction to the Baldrige-based Communities of Excellence Framework</b></p> <p>Interactive Presentation and Table Activities</p> <p><i>Manuel Castañeda, Faculty/Mentor, Rio Rancho, NM</i></p> <p><i>Gary Floss, Faculty, New Brighton, MN</i></p> <p>Community work is complex! An innovative, Baldrige-based systems approach can help you engage more people, collaboratively align efforts, and improve outcomes in the community. Learn how this framework can be used to create approaches, options, and solutions to collaboratively enact meaningful change in your community.</p>
3:50 – 4:00 pm	<p><b>Wrap Up of Day One</b></p> <p><i>Harry Hertz, Faculty, Boyds, MD</i></p>		
4:30 – 6:00 pm	<p><b>Let's Have a Wheel Nice Time!</b></p> <p>Reception and Networking</p> <p><i>Generously hosted by the City of Excelsior Springs</i></p>		

## DAY TWO – FRIDAY APRIL 22<sup>nd</sup>

7:30 – 8:15 am	<b>Breakfast</b>
8:15 – 8:35 am	<p><b>Your Reflections from Day One</b></p> <p><i>Sandra Potthoff, Faculty/Board/Mentor, Nisswa, MN</i></p>
8:35 – 9:30 am	<p><b>Keynote – Dell Gines</b></p> <p><i>Lead Community Development Officer</i></p> <p><i>Federal Reserve of Kansas City – Omaha Branch, Kansas City, MO</i></p>
9:30 – 9:45 am	<i>Been Driving all Day - Need a Brake</i>

9:45 – 10:45 am	<p><b>Overcoming Roadblocks</b>  Panel Discussion  <i>Facilitated by Brian Lassiter, Faculty/Board/Mentor, Minneapolis, MN</i></p> <p>We've all faced challenges along the way, but we've also overcome many hurdles. During this session we will discuss some of the most common roadblocks encountered by community excellence groups in engagement, continuity, leadership and more. A panel of COE community leaders will share how they've addressed many of these common roadblocks. Come prepared to ask questions and share your own success stories or challenges.</p>	
10:45 – 11:00 am	<p><i>Been Driving all Day - Need a Brake</i></p>	
10:45 – 11:45 am	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>National Learning Collaborative Participants</b></p> <p><b>Get to Know Your Traveling Companions</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Alumni (Cohorts 1 and 2) <i>Faculty: Lowell Kruse and Stephanie Norling</i></li> <li>• Cohort 3 Year 3 <i>Faculty: Kim Halfhill and Harry Hertz</i></li> <li>• Cohort 4 Year 2 <i>Faculty: Gary Floss and Brian Lassiter</i></li> <li>• Cohort 5 Year 1 <i>Faculty: Brenda Grant and Sandra Potthoff</i></li> </ul> <p>Activity and Discussion grouped by Cohort and Faculty</p> <p>It's been a while! After two years of only virtual sessions, we want to set aside some time for our cohorts to reconnect. The specifics of each cohort's time together will be determined by the faculty for that cohort. Join us and either reconnect or get to know your traveling companions on your community excellence journeys.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>General Participants</b></p> <p><b>Destination Community Collaboration</b>  <i>Viewing your Community as an Inter-connected System</i>  Interactive Presentation  <i>Christel Gollnick, Faculty/Mentor, Trimble, MO</i>  <i>Manuel Castañeda, Faculty/Mentor, Rio Rancho, NM</i></p> <p>Big dreams and accomplishments require big picture thinking and systems leadership. Join us for a brief introduction to why systems thinking is so important to successful community collaboration efforts. We will share the habits of a systems thinker and give you an opportunity to discuss how to apply the concepts to the next steps of your work together as you prepare to make the most of your place for the people who live, learn, work, and play in your community.</p>
11:45 – 12:00 pm	<p><b>Closing Remarks and Conference Conclusion</b></p>	