

NATIONAL LEARNING COLLABORATIVE

A Systematic Approach to Excellence in Communities: Using a Baldrige-based Framework to Lead Transformation

Developed and led by Communities of Excellence 2026
In partnership with the National Baldrige Performance Excellence Program.



October 2019 to September 2020

A twelve-month learning opportunity to accelerate your community's efforts to improve the health, safety, educational attainment and economic vitality of residents.

communities of excellence ²⁰²⁶

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Welcome

The United States as a nation turns 250 in the year 2026, which is why a small group of visionaries created a nonprofit called *Communities of Excellence 2026 (COE 2026)*. Our collective goal is not just to *make it* to 2026, but to create a framework that systematically addresses our nation's issues at a grass roots level – within the communities in which we all live, work, and play – such that we sustain our nation's strength for many generations, many centuries to come.

Communities of Excellence 2026 uses a validated improvement framework – Baldrige – to improve health status, educational attainment, economic vitality and other key community outcomes by focusing on improving overall community performance in addition to individual components within communities.

We are inspired by all the hard work and dedication exhibited by the many organizations, businesses, schools, governmental units, resident groups and beyond to improve our communities. However, as a country, we are still coming up short in so many key areas vital to our wellbeing. Communities of Excellence 2026 does not try to duplicate any of the efforts already existing in a community. Instead, we seek to strengthen, improve and help sustain those efforts so that our communities see better, sustainable results over the long term.

We began with two pilot sites; San Diego County's South Region and the 18 Counties of Northwest Missouri in 2016. The progress of these pilots convinced us that we should take our effort to the next level. We wanted to provide an opportunity for communities across the country to work together, to share successes and challenges, best practices and ideas for improvement, and learn from one another on their journeys to community excellence using the Communities of Excellence framework. In 2017 we launched our first national learning collaborative of communities. In total, nine communities participated ranging from rural communities and rural regions, to suburbs and cities, to large urban regions. One year later, we launched a second cohort, adding five more communities to this national effort.

Building on the success of these first two cohorts, we are pleased to announce that we will add a third cohort of communities to participate in the learning collaborative. We know that America faces great challenges as we approach the 250th anniversary of the nation's founding – the year 2026. We invite you to join Communities of Excellence 2026, the Baldrige Performance Excellence Program and communities from coast to coast to join us as trailblazers in this movement to reshape America's communities.

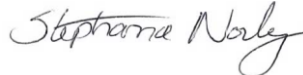
Sincerely,



Lowell Kruse
Chair and Co-Founder
Communities of Excellence 2026



Brian Lassiter
Chair, Alliance for Performance
Excellence and Board, Communities of
Excellence 2026



Stephanie Norling
Director
Communities of Excellence 2026

Overview

The challenges communities face today and in the future require a higher level of performance—a commitment to community performance excellence that grows out of the recognition that the social determinants of educational achievement, economic vitality, and health status are inextricably interwoven. A commitment among leaders across sectors and generations to take **a systematic approach to community performance**.

Such an approach exists for individual organizations — the Baldrige Principles of Performance Excellence — that the founders of Communities of Excellence 2026 have successfully used to improve the performance of organizations they have led. This proven, comprehensive and systematic approach can accelerate a community’s drive to improve quality of life for residents. Adaptation of the Baldrige Framework and Criteria for Performance Excellence to communities began with a team of experts in 2012. Since then the **Communities of Excellence framework** and criteria have undergone multiple iterations based on feedback from community leaders, Baldrige experts and program staff, and engaged community partners.

Why Join?

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.

The Communities of Excellence framework includes a set of key questions for improving the performance of communities and the people who lead and live in them. Rather than prescribe how communities should structure their community leadership, shared initiatives or action plans, or what the mission, goals and measures should be, the framework asks you to make those decisions as a community with input from all key sectors and generations involved.

Our vision is that communities that participate in this learning collaborative will be national role models for community performance excellence through ongoing collaboration. These groups will become the catalyst in a movement to reshape the future of America’s communities.

“With the proven value of Baldrige across educational, healthcare, and civic communities, it only makes sense to go to the next level: thinking of improvement and performance excellence as a collaborative community endeavor.”

Rich Umbdenstock
Former President,
American Hospital
Association and
Communities of
Excellence 2026
Board Member

Key Dates

The learning collaborative officially begins in October, 2019. There will be an in-person meeting on October 24th-25th, 2019 in Nashville, Tennessee during the Baldrige Regional Fall Conference. Prior to this date and beginning immediately upon joining there is a preparatory phase consisting of an application, initial assessment with staff, confirmation of key dates, roles, and expectations, and some assignments in preparation for our first session. The Learning Phase - October through September 2019-2020 - will consist of twice-monthly online sessions and expert reviews to support your collaborative leadership development, Community Profile, and Community Strategic Planning. While communities only have to commit to one year at a time, this collaborative is designed as a three-year engagement effort.

Key Dates at a Glance

1. Initial Assessment Video Conference set up when application is received (No later than July 31st 2019)
2. Preparatory Phase – Initial Assessment Meeting through September 2019
3. First Online Session – Thursday October 3rd 2019 at 9:00 am PT/12:00 pm ET (60 minutes)
4. In-person Conference – October 24th/25th, 2019 in Nashville, Tennessee
5. Online Sessions – 1st and 3rd Thursday of every month through September 17th, 2020 (60 minutes)

Year One Objectives

At the end of year one of the collaborative each community will:

- (Re) define and activate your community excellence team - a **diverse, values-driven leadership team** comprised of residents from the community's key sectors, generations, social and economic groups.
- Develop your first Baldrige-based **Community Profile**.
- Use the information in your Community Profile to identify the **next steps** towards your community of excellence journey.
- Identify one or more **community strategic objectives and outcomes** based on your Community Profile.

Years Two and Three

Year Two

Year two continues by moving from planning to action, with a focus on deployment of community strategies and a systematic understanding of each community's key processes and assets that need to be leveraged, as well as to how to identify and evaluate them for improvement and maximize results. We help communities identify the key results they need to track and the measures critical to understanding how successful they are at reaching their goals. Finally, we revisit core values and concepts that are integrated across the Communities of Excellence framework and that are vital to sustainable, long-term success.

Year Two Objectives

- Prioritize and develop an action plan around one or more opportunities for improvement (OFIs) from your Communities of Excellence assessment feedback.
- Analyze and refine your community excellence group operations (Category 6).
- Develop a community performance scorecard (Category 4).

- Analyze and refine your community excellence group leadership processes (Category 1).
- Continue to refine the Community Profile and use as a driver of community performance excellence.

Year Three

In year three we will dive deeper into each community's operations and continue to address prioritized opportunities for improvement. We will also add a focus on Residents and Other Customers (Category 3) and People and Organizational Resources (Category 5) to ensure that the residents' voice is systematically captured, that they are engaged in community efforts and that the people and organizations that do the work of the community are aligned, engaged and their contributions are maximized.

Benefits of Participation

- Learn from and network with other communities on their community performance excellence journeys.
- Gain in-depth knowledge of this innovative approach to community performance.
- Collaborate with sector leaders and Baldrige experts; sharing approaches, innovations, best practices, successes, and challenges to accelerate their community's collective efforts.
- Become trailblazers to an innovative approach to community improvement.
- Learn how to apply Continuous Quality Improvement strategies to build, sustain and spread prioritized action plans to advance your community's mission.
- Engage with community leaders and Baldrige experts in facilitated sessions designed to accelerate your systems thinking knowledge.

Who Should Participate?

This Learning Collaborative is designed for communities of any size or complexity who are committed to the journey to community performance excellence. **They must recognize that meaningful, lasting change does not happen overnight**, but takes all sectors and all generations of the community working towards a shared community vision with shared community values.

We work with communities ranging from small rural communities of 5,000 residents to a large urban region of 500,000. What they have in common are cross-sector, inter-generational groups of formal and informal community leaders who are willing to commit the time, energy and resources to apply the principles of community performance excellence to their community with a committed backbone organization to support them.

We are looking for up to ten communities that:

- Have a pre-existing community leadership team representing all sectors and generations. This could take many forms including regional coalitions or a pre-existing collaborative;
- OR have commitments from members of key sectors such as health, education, business, government, social services and safety, as well as generations to participate.

- Have an identified backbone organization(s) that provides the ongoing support required to sustain the effort and serve as the key contact.
- Are willing to share generously and commit the time and resources required to meaningfully engage in implementing the Communities of Excellence framework.
- Have individuals engaged that possess a knowledge of Baldrige Performance Excellence Principles or a strong desire to learn.

Program Fee

The fee to participate in year one of the National Learning Collaborative is \$20,000 and includes all online sessions, expert reviews, access to the communications platform and registration fees for two (2) participants to attend the in-person conference and Baldrige Fall Conference on October 24-25 in Nashville, TN.

Learning Activities

The Learning Activities in this collaborative are patterned on the best practices in online collaborative learning. The collaborative includes some pre-work, twice monthly Cohort-wide online sessions and periodic individual online sessions with our experts. The curriculum is designed for communities at varying levels of readiness to advance their community’s current efforts, learn from and share best practices with each other. In addition, communities will have access to a Communications and Knowledge Sharing Platform specifically designed for this Learning Collaborative.

Online Sessions

These sessions are led by COE 2026 Faculty and invited presenters. Online sessions often include an assignment that assists the community to build their Profile, and develop their Leadership and Strategic Plan. In general, sessions are designed to enable engaging, productive conversation that allows communities to ask questions, discuss challenges and share best practices. For many sessions we will invite one of our collaborative communities to present their work relevant to the topic of that session. We use Zoom Video Communications for our online sessions.

Timeline

	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	July	Aug	Sept
Preparation Phase	•												
Launch/In-person Session		•											
Focus on Results		•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Building the Foundation for Excellence		•	•	•	•								
Community Profile Development		•	•	•	•	•							

Draft Community Profile						•							
Community Leadership Development	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Community Strategy Development					•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Focus on Sustainability and Spread										•	•	•	•
Final Community Profile													•
End of Year One													•

Evaluation

As an organization we value transparency and continuous quality improvement. To this end, we have a contract with the Nonprofit Institute’s Caster Family Center for Nonprofit and Philanthropic Research in San Diego, California for systematic and meaningful evaluation of both the processes and preliminary outcomes of the National Learning Collaborative. In addition to establishing communities’ baseline proficiencies with information captured at the beginning of the collaborative, participants may be asked to respond to occasional surveys and to engage with the Castor Center staff in focus groups throughout the Learning Collaborative.

Expectations of the Participating Communities

To fully benefit from this collaborative, we believe that communities will need to understand and meet the following expectations:

Key Leadership Commitment

To maximize results, the Learning Collaborative should be a recognized priority by each individual participant as well as participating organizations’ senior leadership and governing boards.

Dedicated Project Resources

This effort requires a committed backbone organization to manage the collaborative, and within it, at least 2-3 individuals to serve as project leaders for the collaborative. It is expected that these individuals will attend and participate in all Collaborative sessions, complete assignments as required and be able to educate the broader collaborative leadership on the COE framework and its implementation. The project leaders will oversee the day-to-day activities of the team and the time, resources, and accountability needed to succeed.

Valuing Diversity and Inclusiveness

Participating communities must recognize the importance of celebrating diversity and actively seeking to include diverse opinions. They acknowledge that they must engage and include all of their residents as full participants who work together to create and enjoy living in a community of excellence.

Community Coach(s)

We believe that the long-term sustainable success of a community of excellence will require an individual who serves as a Community Coach. Communities benefit from a Coach to guide the community collaborative through the framework and their community improvement efforts, facilitate collaboration across sectors and generations, and identify and train a new generation of leaders in the community. In our experience, the appointment of a Community Coach does not have to happen immediately, but should be considered as a priority when resources are available.

A Commitment to Applying the Baldrige Principles

Succeeding in this work requires a willingness to embrace systems-wide thinking and action. Successful communities will commit to learning the Baldrige Principles or will have leaders that are already skilled in its implementation.

Dedicated Support for Measurement and Data Infrastructure

Few organizations or Collaboratives have all the data they need to understand and improve their communities. In addition to using the data already available, communities may need to develop new ways to collect and use data, including looking beyond their own data systems to external sources.

To Enroll or Learn More

Please contact Communities of Excellence 2026 Director Stephanie Norling at snorling@communitiesofexcellence2026.org or by phone at 858-342-8185 for more information or the Application Form. Communities are encouraged to enroll by July 31st 2019, however depending on circumstances, we may allow enrollment after this date.

Appendix

Faculty

Manuel G. Castaneda has over 13 years' experience in the Health & Human Services field and is currently a Human Services Operational Manager for the County of San Diego Health and Human Services Agency (HHS), Central & South Regions. As a member of the backbone organization, he is one of the leads in applying the Communities of Excellence framework in the San Diego South Region Community. In 2014 he was trained as a California Awards for Performance Excellence Examiner. He is a certified Lean Six Sigma Green Belt and has taught Yellow Belt Classes. He has worked on a range of Baldrige activities and led numerous Lean Six Sigma projects within HHS. In addition to his current operational experience he has ample experience in writing policies, developing processes, designing systems, data analysis, and database querying.

Ellen Garshick is the program analyst for the Baldrige Performance Excellence Program. She has served on the Baldrige staff since 2007, leading projects such as Baldrige Excellence Framework revision, research on program-related issues, and the writing and production of numerous program publications. She has worked in a range of Baldrige Program activities, including serving as a Baldrige Examiner Training facilitator and a monitor and technical editor for the Baldrige Award process. Her pre-Baldrige background includes 20 years of experience writing, editing, and producing all kinds of publications and 8 years as a teacher of English and academic skills to speakers of other languages.

Brenda Grant recently joined the Western Maryland Health System in Cumberland, Maryland as Performance Excellence Coach responsible for strategic planning and leading the organization's performance excellence efforts using the Baldrige framework. Prior to her current role, she served as the Chief Strategy Officer for Charleston Area Medical Center Health System in Charleston, West Virginia where she was responsible for development and deployment of strategic and business plans for the system and led the CAMC Health System's Baldrige efforts culminating in being a recipient of the 2015 Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award. Brenda has worked extensively with the development, implementation and creating long-term success of community health programs. She was responsible for the Kanawha Coalition for Community Health Improvement's early involvement in Communities of Excellence 2026. She has experience with collaborative networks, community health needs assessment, and development of prevention and wellness programs for businesses and managed care, workforce and medical staff development planning and outcome measurement. She also led CAMC Health System's efforts to address the criteria in the Baldrige Cybersecurity Excellence Builder. Brenda has served as a Senior Examiner for the Baldrige Performance Excellence Program and is the Chief Judge for The Partnership for Excellence. She serves as Board Chair for the United Way of Central West Virginia. Brenda has a Bachelor of Science in Nursing and a Master's in Business Administration.

Dr. Harry Hertz has had extensive experience in analyzing organizational performance and strategy. He has been responsible for interpreting "the leading edge of validated management practice" from 1995-2013 as the Director, and since 2013 as Director Emeritus, of the Baldrige Performance Excellence Program. For that period he was the primary architect and author of the evolving Criteria for Performance Excellence. He has overseen and been involved in analyzing more than 1,000 organizations from business,

education, health care, and the nonprofit sectors. He currently serves as co-facilitator of the Baldrige Executive Fellows Program, a year-long executive development program for C-suite executives. In 2013, the Harry S. Hertz Leadership Award was created in his honor by the Foundation for the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award to recognize individuals for outstanding leadership attributes and performance

Brian Lassiter has been president of the Performance Excellence Network (formerly Minnesota Council for Quality) since 2001. Previously, he was managing director for Ian Alliot Consulting, principal consultant for Norstan Consulting, corporate quality consultant for the St. Paul Companies, consultant for Price Waterhouse, and quality manager for Boatmen's National Bank. In these roles, Lassiter has worked with dozens of organizations in a variety of industries to help them improve their performance and competitiveness.

From 1998 to 2012, Lassiter served on the board of examiners for the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award. He has also served as a senior evaluator for the Minnesota Quality Award, as a judge for the Veteran's Administration Baldrige-based Carey Award, a judge for the Baldrige-based American Health Care Association (long-term care) quality awards, and as a member of the board of directors for Goodwill/Easter Seals of Minnesota. He is chair of the board of directors of the Alliance for Performance Excellence, the national consortium of all state and local quality awards, and is also chair of Benedictine Health System, a long-term care system based in Duluth, Minn.

Sandra Potthoff PhD is Professor and Department Head in the Department of Health Policy and Management at the University of South Florida in Tampa. She earned her undergraduate degree in Social Work, and her Master's and PhD degrees in Industrial Engineering, specializing in health systems, from the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

Dr. Potthoff's research expertise is in operational analytics and modeling for systems improvement and effectiveness in healthcare delivery. In addition, she has studied the impact of home telemedicine for the elderly, and has conducted program evaluation of youth development programs. She teaches in the areas of data analytics and operations research in health care, problem solving in health service organizations, information uses in long-term care, and interprofessional teamwork in health care. She is the former director of the Master of Healthcare Administration Program at the University of Minnesota, a past board member of the Association of University Programs in Health Administration, and a past board member, vice president, and president of the Health Applications Section of the Institute for Operations Research and the Management Sciences.

Core Values and Concepts

These beliefs and behaviors are embedded in high-performing communities. They are the foundation of community performance excellence and the results-oriented framework that creates a basis for action, feedback, and sustainability.

Core Values and Concepts:

- Community Perspective
- Visionary Community Leadership
- Ethics and Transparency

- Resident and Customer Engagement
- Valuing Diversity and Inclusiveness
- Building and Sharing Knowledge
- Agility
- Focus on the Future
- Encouraging Innovation
- Measuring Performance
- Societal Responsibility
- Focus on Excellence
- Delivering Value and Results

Community Perspective

A Community Perspective means viewing your community as more than just the sum of its individual parts. A community of excellence views itself as a unified whole, with the different community groups, workforce groups, resident groups, and stakeholders actively aligned and collaborating to produce results.

Visionary Community Leadership

Your community's formal and informal leaders should set a vision for the community, create a resident focus, demonstrate clear and visible community values and ethics, and set high expectations for the people and organizations in community.

Ethics and Transparency

Community leaders should express ethics and transparency in all community interactions. Formal and Informal leaders should be role models, deserving of trust by their community. Transparency is characterized by consistently candid and open communication by community leaders and by the sharing of clear and accurate information.

Resident and Customer Engagement

Residents and other customers are the ultimate judges and beneficiaries in a high performing community. To engage residents and other customers adequately requires deep knowledge of their needs and priorities.

Valuing Diversity and Inclusiveness

Communities of Excellence recognize the importance of celebrating diversity and actively seeking to include diverse opinions. They acknowledge that they must engage and include all of their residents as full participants who work together to create and enjoy living in a community of health, sustainable wealth, vitality, and safety.

Building and Sharing Knowledge

Building and Sharing knowledge includes documenting past and current successful efforts and sharing those successes with other community groups and communities across the country to benefit all our residents.

Agility

Communities of Excellence strive to act quickly and move nimbly in recognizing and addressing challenges and opportunities. They work to streamline processes to achieve their ends with minimum extraneous work while at the same time recognizing the importance of allowing all interested parties to contribute.

Focus on the Future

Taking the long view — how will this decision affect our children’s children — is a key criterion when making decisions that affect the health and well-being of the community. Recognizing the importance of helping grow the next generation of residents to assume formal and informal community leadership positions, Communities of Excellence place special emphasis on ensuring that all their children have equal opportunity and support to grow into productive, engaged community residents.

Encouraging Innovation

Innovation means making meaningful change to improve the health, educational status, vitality, and safety of your community’s resident. Innovation is particularly required where resident indicators in these key areas of performance are struggling. Innovation should lead your community to new dimensions of performance.

Measuring Performance

Measuring performance should provide critical data and information about key indicators, resident groups, community engagement, processes, and information sharing. Selected measurements should derive from your community’s needs and strategic objectives.

Mutual Societal Responsibility

Your community’s leaders should recognize the value of the businesses, organizations, and community groups that operate in a high performing community. A community of excellence will work to engage and align these groups’ efforts towards societal well-being to achieve maximum impact and mutual benefit between a community’s residents and the businesses, organizations and community groups that are based in them.

Focus on Excellence

A focus on excellence involves focusing on not just results, but the processes and relationships that help create those results in communities. Communities of Excellence benchmark both results and processes and understand the difference between incremental improvement and direct comparison to best in class performance; striving for the latter.

Delivering Value and Results

By delivering value to community groups, residents, and customers, your community contributes to the improved health status, increased educational attainment and increasing vitality of society as a whole. Your community’s performance indicators need to focus on key results. These results needs to be a composite of measures that include process results, resident and other customer results, people and

organizational results, leadership, and strategy results; all with the end result of improving your community's performance in health status, educational attainment, and economic vitality.

About Communities of Excellence 2026

Communities of Excellence 2026's mission is to improve the quality of life for our nation's residents by assisting communities in implementing the Baldrige-based Communities of Excellence framework.