

**communities** of excellence 2026

# NATIONAL LEARNING COLLABORATIVE

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



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October 2018 to September 2019

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

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

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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.

The philosophical foundation of COE2026 is that the continuous improvement tools which have been proven to impact outcomes *within* organizations can be used to improve community outcomes *across* organizations. Communities of Excellence 2026 is using 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 journey to community excellence using the Communities of Excellence Framework. Last year 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.

Building on the success of this first cohort, we are pleased to announce that we are adding a second cohort of communities to participate in the learning collaborative beginning in October of 2018. 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 has 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.

## Key Dates

The learning collaborative will officially begin in October, 2017. There will be an in-person meeting on October 24<sup>th</sup>-25<sup>th</sup>, 2018 in Denver, Colorado during the Baldrige Regional Fall Conference. Prior to this date and beginning immediately upon joining there will be an preparatory phase consisting of an

*“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

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 2018-2019 - will consist of twice-monthly online sessions and expert reviews to support your collaborative leadership development, Community Profile, and Community Strategic Plan. While we only ask communities to commit to one year at a time, this collaborative is designed as a multi-year engagement effort. At the end of the first year, communities will have the opportunity to join the collaborative for a second year.

### **Key Dates at a Glance**

1. Initial Assessment Video Conference set up when application is received (No later than July 31<sup>st</sup> 2018)
2. Preparatory Phase – Initial Assessment through September 2018
3. First Online Session – Wednesday October 3<sup>rd</sup> 2018 at 9:00 am PT/12:00 pm ET (60 minutes)
4. In-person Conference – October 24<sup>th</sup>/25<sup>th</sup>, 2018 in Denver, Colorado
5. Online Sessions – 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Wednesday of every month through September 18<sup>th</sup> 2019 (60 minutes)

### **Year One Objectives**

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

- Develop a Baldrige-based Community Profile, and use it to identify the next steps towards their community of excellence journey.
- Identify desired community outcomes and develop a Community Strategic Plan focused on these outcomes.
- Establish a diverse, values-driven leadership team comprised of residents and stakeholders from the community's key sectors, generations, social and economic groups.

### **Year Two and Beyond**

Communities will have the opportunity to continue to participate in the Learning Collaborative at the end of year one. In year two we will move from planning to action through a curriculum that will focus on responding to the full Criteria for Community Performance Excellence, deployment of Action Plans that derive from the Community Strategic Plan you developed in year one, and expansion of the Community Leadership System and further engagement of residents and key stakeholders. In order to address the requirements of communities in differing stages of readiness, we will work with each community in year one to determine how we can best facilitate their year two journey.

### **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 - health, education, business, government, social services and safety, and generations to participate.
- Have an identified backbone organization 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 cost for one year of participation is \$20,000.

## 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 Performance Excellence		•	•	•	•								
Community Profile Development		•	•	•	•								
Draft Community Profile					•								
Community Leadership Development	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Community Strategy Development					•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Community Strategic Plan Draft													•
Focus on Sustainability and Spread										•	•	•	•
Final Draft of 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 will be asked to respond to quarterly surveys and 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, 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.

### 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 will 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.

### 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.

## To Enroll or Learn More

Please contact Communities of Excellence 2026 Director Stephanie Norling at [snorling@communitiesofexcellence2026.org](mailto:snorling@communitiesofexcellence2026.org) or by phone at 858-342-8185 for more information or the



Application Form. Communities are encouraged to enroll by July 31<sup>st</sup> 2018, however depending on circumstances, we may allow enrollment after this date.

## Appendix

### Faculty

**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 Criteria 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 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.

**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.

## 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.

## 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.