

communities of excellence²⁰²⁶ Spring Edition

What's Ahead: Partnerships, Programs, and a Path Forward

As we move into spring, there's exciting momentum building across Communities of Excellence 2026. From new training opportunities and strategic partnerships to another framework update, our work continues to evolve to meet the needs of communities across the country.



Message from Stephanie

Stephanie Norling

President/CEO, Communities of Excellence 2026

Expanding Our Reach with Lincoln Vibrant Communities

One of our most exciting developments is our growing partnership with Claremont Lincoln University and Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, through their joint initiative: Lincoln Vibrant Communities. Together, we are supporting cross-sector teams from across the U.S. who are working to improve outcomes in their communities. Through coaching, team-building curriculum, and shared learning, this partnership is helping to spread performance-based community development and leadership tools to more people, in more places.

New National Learning Collaborative Cohort Launching in October

We're also excited to announce that our next National Learning Collaborative cohort will begin in October 2025. This cohort will benefit from a streamlined six-month Phase 1 focused on building readiness, aligning leadership, and identifying key community priorities. At just \$10,000, the updated format is more accessible while preserving the quality and structure that drive results.

Next Building Strong Teams Course Begins This Summer

In addition, our Building Strong Teams for CollaborACTION course will return this summer. This six-session online training is designed to help communities form and strengthen effective cross-sector teams, especially those just getting started or tackling new priorities. Participants will walk away with practical tools, a draft engagement plan, and an outline for a pitch deck to mobilize partners.

Refreshing the Framework, Guided by Community Voices

Every two years, we review and update the Communities of Excellence Framework to ensure it continues to serve communities effectively. The next revision, coming in September 2025, reflects feedback from the communities currently using the framework and from reviewers participating in our assessment and recognition program. While no major changes are planned, we're focused on simplifying and clarifying the language and structure to make the framework even more practical and accessible for teams at all levels of experience.

Strategic Planning for What's Next

Internally, we are engaged in a robust strategic planning process with our board and team. These conversations are helping us clarify where we're headed, how our programs fit together, and how we can best support the evolving needs of communities and partners nationwide.

Warm regards,

Stephanie Norling

President and CEO

Communities of Excellence 2026

LEADERSHIP SPOTLIGHT-

Community Bridgemakers Driving Change in Region Five, Minnesota

Building Bridges to Strengthen Communities

Community Bridgemakers was born from a bold yet straightforward vision: to create vibrant, thriving communities across central Minnesota by breaking down barriers, aligning efforts, and finding systemic solutions to shared challenges. With a strong history of collaboration between the private, public, and nonprofit sectors, Sourcewell, the Initiative Foundation, and Region Five Development came together to dream bigger — and take collective action.

Community Bridgemakers formed to unite expertise and resources, working with greater intentionality and efficiency to maximize impact across the region. Over the past year, this collaborative effort has shown that when people come together with purpose, intention, and a belief in the power of collaboration, extraordinary things happen.

COMMUNITY PARTNER SPOTLIGHT-

Lincoln Vibrant Communities

Building Lincoln Vibrant Communities

Lincoln Vibrant Communities was developed through the visionary leadership of Lynn Priddy, Ph.D., President and CEO of Claremont Lincoln University (CLU) and George “Mac” McCarthy, Ph.D., President and CEO of the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy (LILP). Together with input from their respective Boards and experts in the field, these two leaders created a program designed to cultivate a pipeline of ethical leaders in every facet of local governance, reshaping the world one community at a time. The result of that work is a one-of-a-kind program that invests in leadership, policy, and advanced practical skills to build communities defined by trust, civic engagement, and a focus on positive change. This work is made possible by a unique alliance between these two organizations.

WHAT'S NEW

Earlier this month at the Baldrige Foundation Awards, we were proud to celebrate five incredible leaders for their excellence in community leadership: Angela Brandt, Javier Hernandez-Lichtl, Sandra Potthoff, Ph.D., Renee Rodriguez-Goodemote, M.D., and Brenda Grant.

It was such a joy to watch them receive this well-deserved recognition! Each has made a lasting impact through their work with Communities of Excellence—serving as board members, faculty, and champions of the Framework in their communities. We're grateful for their dedication and inspired by their leadership!