



Communities of Resilience & Excellence

Quarterly Newsletter

LEAVING ONE CHAPTER, ENTERING THE NEXT

As we close out 2025 and step into 2026, I've found myself thinking less about what's new and more about what we are consciously choosing to leave behind, and what we are intentionally carrying forward.



"This rebrand is not a departure, but a natural evolution," said Stephanie Norling, President and CEO of C.O.R.E.

"It preserves the foundational purpose of uplifting communities through aligned, cross-sector action while introducing a name that is more current, accessible, and resonant with today's change-makers."

When this organization was first envisioned more than a decade ago, the name Communities of Excellence 2026 was chosen with purpose. Our co-founders, Lowell and Rick, wanted to call it Communities of Excellence, but that name was already widely used. Adding "2026" was not a workaround; it was a statement. It marked the 250th anniversary of our country's founding as a moment to aim toward - a stake in the ground that reflected both ambition and belief in what communities could accomplish over time.

Back in 2010, and again when the organization formally launched in 2013, that future felt distant. The name created a horizon. It invited long-term thinking. It reinforced the idea that excellence is built, not declared.

In the very **first article** Lowell and Rick wrote about this work for the National Civic League in 2014, they described community excellence not as a program or a plan, but as a long-term commitment to collaborative leadership, disciplined use of data, and continuous improvement across sectors. They were clear that no single organization could do this alone, and that real progress would require communities to align, measure what matters, and stay with the work over time. In their words, performance excellence was "a journey—for most, a journey of many years."



That belief shaped everything that followed—and it still does.

But as we enter 2026, something important has shifted. We are no longer working toward that future milestone. We are working within it. The challenges communities face today are more complex, more interconnected, and more dynamic than they were a decade ago. Resilience is no longer optional. It is essential.

That is why this moment feels less like a rebrand and more like a transition.

With our new name, **C.O.R.E. - Communities of Resilience & Excellence**, we are not leaving behind our purpose, our values, or the foundational ideas that started this work. We are leaving behind a name tied to a date, and fully stepping into an identity built for what comes next. One that reflects how communities are actually operating today: adapting in real time, leading across systems, and focusing not just on planning, but on execution and sustained results.

Along with this transition, our new website is now live at connectwithcore.org, bringing our programs, tools, and resources together in a way that better reflects how communities engage with us today. It's clearer, more accessible, and designed to support communities wherever they are on their journey.

As we move forward, what we carry with us matters just as much as what we leave behind. We carry forward the original vision. We carry forward the belief that alignment across sectors changes outcomes. And we carry forward the discipline of focusing on what actually improves quality of life.

2026 is not an endpoint.
It is a threshold.

I am deeply grateful to everyone who has been part of this journey so far, and excited for what this next chapter makes possible.

Stephanie Norling
President & CEO
Communities of Resilience & Excellence (C.O.R.E.)



COMMUNITY HIGHLIGHT

Coral Gables Florida: A Powerful Approach To World-Class Results

By David Harrawood, Belkys Perez, and Erin Dowd.

In 2019, we launched the Coral Gables Community of Excellence (CGCOE) initiative with a simple vision: to be a world-class city with a hometown feel using the Community of Resilience & Excellence (C.O.R.E) framework. Located in the heart of Miami, Florida, Coral Gables covers 12.9 square miles and has a population of approximately 50,000 residents.

Our five-member CGCOE executive team includes a balanced set of community executives representing the Chamber of Commerce, community foundation, healthcare, school district, and the city of Coral Gables.

Creating a Compelling Community Scorecard

To objectively measure our progress towards our vision, the executive team created a one-page community scorecard that includes a balanced set of five strategic goals, and 13 strategic objectives (what we want to increase or decrease) aligned to each.

In addition, our executive team took a bold step to objectively and transparently define a world-class city as when performance of our 13 strategic objectives is in the top 20th percentile ranking, or 20 percent better than when compared to Miami-Dade County, Florida, and the United States.

Success & Recognition

And after 6 years of relentless dedication using a proven systematic approach to achieve our vision, for the first time in 2025, all 13 of our strategic objectives exceeded our communities vision target levels. Below is a summary of our communities outcomes:

- Violent crime reduced by 42 percent
- Accidental deaths reduced by 75 percent
- Chronic disease rates improved compared to county, state, and national averages
- High school graduation rates up 10 percent
- Unemployment decreased
- Increased medium household income
- Resident and business quality of life satisfaction results are in the top 3 percent nationwide



We are extremely proud to be recognized as the first community to receive C.O.R.E's Gold Level recognition at their annual conference in 2025, and the first community in the nation to be eligible to apply for the Malcom Baldrige National Quality Award in 2026, the only presidential level recognition for performance excellence.



A Proven & Systematic System

If you and your community are interested in achieving similar results and dramatically improving the quality of life for your residents, below are the simple, yet powerful steps we used, and you can easily adapt to your community's unique needs.

Step 1: Create a “Compelling” Community Scorecard

The most recent C.O.R.E. criteria focus on 7 quality of life aspects. For each, identify community leaders who have authority, influence, expertise, and financial and non-financial resources to champion each.

Schedule a meeting of your seven quality of life champions and come to consensus on 2 or 3 strategic objectives – what you want to increase, or decrease, important to your community for each quality of life aspects. And once confirmed, create trend charts of past performance (3 to 5 years) for each, and use the results to Identify desirable short, and long-term performance target levels (1 to 5 years) for each of your strategic objective.

Step 2: Meet Monthly to Review Your Community Scorecard

It's critical to remember, you can't improve what you don't do. To begin improving the key outcomes within your community, you must immediately schedule monthly community scorecard meetings with your 7-member executive team over the next 12 months. Doing this will help you identify and confirm those community leaders who are committed to working towards achieving your vision.



Using the 7 quality of life aspects as your meeting agenda, have each executive champion visually display your trend charts for the performance for each of the key strategic objectives aligned to each, and as a team perform the following:

1. Celebrate and communicate your community's successes.
2. Identify performance below desired target levels,
3. Schedule a meeting with service program process owners to identify challenges and solutions to improve performance.

Step 3: Implement a Rapid Process Improvement System

With the identification of strategic objectives results below desired target level, next is to implement a rapid process improvement system.

Begin by conducting a retrospective root cause study to identify the 4 Ws – Who, What, Where, and When performance below target levels.

As you review past performance, total the frequency each of the 4Ws contributed to performance below target level and use the data to create pareto charts, a powerful tool to visually display, from highest to lowest, the major contributors why performance is below target.

Once your team has identified the key root causes, gather a team of program and service owners to brainstorm, select, and implement solutions you believe will overcome each of the key root causes and quickly improve performance.

Suggested Next Steps & Resources

If you're interested in translating inspiration into action, the resources below offer practical ways to build alignment, strengthen collaboration, and move toward measurable community outcomes:

- Watch the full [Coral Gables Impact in Action webinar](#) (free) to hear directly from community leaders about how they aligned priorities, used shared data, and sustained progress.
- Explore [Milestone 1 of the C.O.R.E. Impact Pathway](#), beginning Tuesday February 3rd, which helps communities build strong, aligned cross-sector teams as the foundation for long-term impact.
- Learn more about the [C.O.R.E. Engagement Program](#), which offers flexible ways for individuals, organizations, and communities to engage, learn, and contribute based on their role and readiness.





2025 CONFERENCE: A RESOUNDING SUCCESS

The 2025 Conference proved just how powerful it is when community leaders come together with purpose. Over two energizing days, cross-sector teams from across the country connected, learned, and dug into practical strategies for turning collaboration into real, measurable impact.

From engaging workshops to honest conversations about what it actually takes to move the needle, the conference delivered ideas people could use immediately. Attendees left with new partnerships, sharper tools, and renewed momentum to lead meaningful change back home. Bottom line: this wasn't just a great conference, it was a catalyst.





WHAT'S NEW

GET TO KNOW THE IMPACT PATHWAY - MILESTONE 1 BEGINS FEBRUARY 3RD, 2026

We're excited to launch the Impact Pathway, a guided five-milestone journey designed to help community teams turn vision into measurable results. Grounded in the C.O.R.E. Guide and supported by expert facilitation, the Pathway equips cross-sector teams to build trust, align strategy, use data effectively, and drive long-term impact.



The next cohort begins with Milestone 1 on February 3rd, 2026 — a great starting point for communities ready to take action or deepen their collaborative efforts. Whether you're just forming your team or looking to accelerate your momentum, the Impact Pathway meets you where you are — and helps you move forward with purpose.

Learn more: connectwithcore.org/what-we-do/impact-pathway

Save Your Spot Today

IN CASE YOU MISSED IT,

Our recent Impact in Action webinar spotlighted Coral Gables and their six-year, data-driven approach to improving community outcomes. By using a shared Community Scorecard, clear targets, and disciplined monthly review, Coral Gables achieved measurable gains across all strategic objectives and became the first community to earn C.O.R.E.'s Gold Level recognition.

You can now watch the full recording for free at bit.ly/ImpactCoralGables.

Together, we are creating a movement for community resilience and excellence.

