

Communities of Excellence 2026

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As we mark the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Healthy Communities movement, we note the great progress toward the movement's ambitious goal of achieving measurable improvements in Americans' health status and quality of life. The anniversary—as well as this special issue of *National Civic Review*—also provides the opportunity for a wide-ranging conversation about the movement's agenda and strategy for continuing that progress.

As the leaders of large health care enterprises, we bore a responsibility to run high-performance organizations. It was a fiscal responsibility but a moral and ethical one too. We met this obligation by bringing to our enterprises the Baldrige Performance Excellence Program, established in the late 1980s as a means to boost U.S. companies' sluggish response to rising economic powerhouses elsewhere in the world, primarily Japan. Originally tailored to manufacturing, in the 1990s the Baldrige criteria were adapted for enterprises in the health care and education sectors.

The Baldrige program helps companies examine their practices, benchmark results against the best performers, and map out and execute changes needed to operate leaner, faster, and better, focusing sharply on customers' needs and expectations and following decisions and strategies based on fact.

Achievement of performance excellence based on the Baldrige criteria is a journey—for most, a journey of many years—and is recognized by the Baldrige Award, given annually by the president of the United States to organizations that have demonstrated performance excellence. Winners have included such respected companies as FedEx, IBM, Nestlé Purina Pet Care, Texas Instruments, Ritz-Carlton Hotels, and divisions of Boeing, Cargill, Merrill Lynch, and Xerox.

Our own organizations, Premier, Inc., the largest health care alliance in the country, based in Charlotte, North Carolina, and Heartland Health, an integrated health delivery system based in St. Joseph, Missouri, received the Baldrige Award in 2006 and 2009, respectively. Building Baldrige Award-worthy

organizations reinforced our belief that the health of communities transcends their health care institutions, meaning that to succeed, those institutions must meaningfully engage in their communities.

The Baldrige criteria helped us to achieve this in the organizations we led, and we believe the criteria can be adapted to provide the same for communities—an idea that a team of Baldrige experts from across the nation has endorsed. A systematic, Baldrige-like approach to performance excellence can instill in communities a long-term commitment to harvest best practices, collect and act on performance data, promote collaborative leadership, and continuously improve processes across sectors, generations, and organizations.

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That belief leads us to propose a new way for American communities to address the challenges they face in health status and the closely related social determinants of health status—educational attainment and economic well-being. It is an initiative called Communities of Excellence 2026—in anticipation of the 250th anniversary of our nation's founding—that will help communities discover and implement fundamentally new and permanent solutions to these challenges using the model of collaborative leadership and performance excellence already proven to work by some of the nation's leading enterprises.

Communities of Excellence 2026 is adapting the Baldrige criteria and incorporating the Healthy Communities movement's Seven Patterns of Successful Communities to create a framework for community performance excellence, a road map for communities that choose to confront their challenges by adopting a proven course of action that demands high performance and a commitment to achieve and sustain the highest quality of life for their people.

Focused initially on community collaboration and performance excellence in the critical and elaborately interrelated sectors of health, education, and

economic vitality, Communities of Excellence 2026 was established to provide the training, skill building, research, knowledge of best practices, and the coaching resources communities need to engender collaboration across sectors. Communities of Excellence 2026 will help communities outline a baseline of performance, determine assets and challenges, establish community criteria for quality and community goals, and measure progress and enact practices for sustainability. Communities of Excellence 2026 will also facilitate communities learning from each other.

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Why the focus on communities? Because despite the importance of federal and state policies and practices, we advance the common good most effectively and durably when we work together in a local community to identify, implement, and sustain improvements that work for that community. Implementing a Baldrige-like standard of community performance excellence will not be easy; unlike the organizations that have successfully adopted the Baldrige criteria, no community has a single broker or agent that can establish new practices and habits. And communities often are more diverse, with more complex cultures, than individual organizations like businesses, schools, hospitals, and others.

The framework of community performance excellence will enable diverse interests and broadly inclusive leadership to formulate and act on a shared community identity and vision. In doing so over the coming decades, such communities will form a growing archipelago across the nation where community performance excellence is achieved and sustained. These will be communities pursuing collaborative strategic plans aimed at achieving bold goals—and measuring progress in ways that both prioritize and inspire further action. They will be communities that consistently outperform others in the nation, and their success will meaningfully influ-

ence others across the country to strive for community performance excellence.

The Path Ahead

The work of implementing the community performance excellence framework will be difficult. We are grateful to our two pilot communities—Rochester, Minnesota, and Northwest Missouri—that will help to test, refine, and perfect the framework. The experiences and first outcomes of the pilot communities will become the foundation upon which Communities of Excellence 2026 will reach out to and engage a second generation of communities to adopt and implement the community performance excellence model.

Americans have a long history of working to make things better. That energy, ardor, and passion are as robust today as ever before. We celebrate this spirit and applaud the efforts of leaders and communities nationwide. To make good the promise of that spirit, we propose a new model of community performance excellence, and we established a nonprofit organization—Communities of Excellence 2026—to help communities achieve it.

As leaders of health care enterprises, we know that health status is inextricably interwoven with educational attainment and economic prosperity. We know that America can again lead the world in these measures of well-being—but only when communities nurture a culture of collaborative leadership across sectors and generations. Only when they commit to continuous improvement everywhere and root their decisions and strategies in fact. Only when they are willing to leave no one behind.

And the work of communities must be to encompass the diverse interests of all residents, to insist on performance excellence, and to coalesce to identify and implement solutions to common problems. In doing so, American communities will continue building on the foundation of democracy and liberty established by our nation's founders.

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