



# 2026 MALCOLM BALDRIGE NATIONAL QUALITY AWARD CRITERIA FOR COMMUNITIES

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# INTRODUCTION

Since its founding in 1987, the Baldrige Performance Excellence Program (BPEP) has served the U.S. economy through its enduring mission: to improve the performance and long-term success of businesses and other organizations by recognizing role models and fostering the sharing and adoption of proven leadership, management, and operational practices. Of course, what it takes to be successful has changed dramatically since then, and therefore, so has Baldrige, the Baldrige Excellence Framework, and the Baldrige Award process.

The Baldrige Excellence Framework provides a comprehensive leadership and management approach that integrates proven best practices into a practical improvement framework applicable to any organization and is the basis for the Baldrige Award Criteria. The framework undergoes regular revision to ensure the concepts and practices remain relevant for organizations striving to achieve higher levels of performance and long-term success.

As part of the CHIPS and Science Act of 2022, Congress approved “Community” as the seventh Award Category. With the 2026 cycle, the Alliance for Performance Excellence – the private sector partner of the National Institute of Standards and Technology and the administrator of the Baldrige National Quality Award process – is pleased to announce that communities are now officially eligible to apply for the Baldrige National Quality Award.

Community can mean a group of people connected by geography, shared identity, common interests, or other forms of affiliation. For this award, community primarily refers to communities of place—such as neighborhoods, towns, cities, or regions—while recognizing that communities of practice, affiliation, and virtual engagement also influence outcomes and drive change.

The Baldrige Award Criteria for Communities has been adapted from the standard award criteria applied to individual organizations and has been informed by the Communities of Resilience & Excellence (C.O.R.E) Guide. A key addition is the term and concept of a “Core Group”, which refers to a cross-sector group of individuals and organizations that lead and coordinate performance improvement efforts within a community. Your community doesn’t have to use the term “core group”, but having a cross-sector leadership group of this type has proven essential.

## PURPOSE

The purpose of the award process is to identify and recognize role-model communities that have achieved and sustained exceptional performance across multiple areas of

importance to the community and its key stakeholders. Award recipients must be willing to share the non-proprietary processes and practices that produced their outstanding results and outcomes. For these reasons, the Award Criteria questions request information regarding both processes and results achieved. Also requested are responses to important context-setting questions that help Baldrige examiners and judges understand your community and the processes and results presented. These context questions are not evaluated.

## APPLICATION

The instructions and questions in this document will appear in the Baldrige Award online application. It is essential to read the application instructions and criteria questions carefully and respond as completely as possible. However, a complete response does not have to use up all the allotted space and/or image uploads in the award application. “Complete” means you have addressed the question in full and provided all the information requested, such as three to five consecutive points of trend of data and relevant comparisons. If you are unable to provide a complete response, you should explain why in the field provided. Missing information that is not explained is likely to impact your evaluation.

## EVALUATION

The evaluation process for the award is separated into two phases—the Application Evaluation phase (including Independent Analysis and Consensus Evaluation) and the Site Visit phase. The Application Evaluation phase is primarily focused on evaluating your performance results in six Award Criteria categories (Leadership; Strategy; Residents and Other Stakeholders; Core Group Intelligence; People Resources; and Operations). This recognizes that, in most cases, the results achieved are a strong indicator of the effectiveness of a community’s processes, especially when demonstrated over a significant period of time. During a site visit, all process responses will be assessed to determine possible best practices leading to high-performance results.

## FINALISTS

In 2026, applicants participating in either Eligibility Pathway #1 (having received an Alliance member’s Top Tier Award within the last four years) or Eligibility Pathway #2 (having received a national site visit within the last two years) are granted automatic Finalist status and will earn a site visit. Applicants participating through the Alternate Eligibility Pathway #3 will have an additional evaluation in the Application Evaluation phase to determine if Finalist status (and a site visit) has been earned.

## 2026 AWARD PROCESS KEY DATES

**March 19** – Award Criteria published.

**April 15** – Intent to Apply due.

**July 1** – Award Application submissions due.

**September/October** – Site Visit phase.

**October/November** – Judges Panel meets to recommend 2026 Baldrige Award recipients.

Thank you for your interest in the Baldrige Award process.

## OVERVIEW OF AWARD CRITERIA

Below are seven categories. The first category, Community Profile, includes context questions that seek important information relevant to the evaluation of the remaining six criteria categories. The Community Profile questions are not evaluated. The next six categories have a combination of questions that ask for additional context, performance results, and descriptions of key processes. Please read the instructions and criteria questions carefully and provide complete responses. Note that your process descriptions should be responsive to the evaluation rubric shown on page 21, demonstrating that the process is regular and repeated and has been improved based on the evaluation.

Your results should be responsive to the scoring rubric shown on page 21, show at least three to five years of trend data, and include your performance against relevant comparisons. Because we are seeking to identify national role models, relevant comparisons are best-in-class or top decile/top quartile and competitors, where available. Please note that a community does not need to demonstrate role-model performance in all areas to become a Baldrige Award recipient. If you are unable to respond completely to a results or process question, you should explain why in the field provided. Missing information that is not explained is likely to impact your evaluation.

# COMMUNITY PROFILE



The information requested in this category provides a high-level snapshot of your community and your core group. Responses to the results and process questions should demonstrate alignment with the information presented in the Community Profile. The Community Profile should not include information about key processes or results.

## COMMUNITY DESCRIPTION QUESTIONS

Examiners will use the responses to these questions during the Award Evaluation phase. Responses to the questions have a 3,000-character limit and may include up to three individual charts, graphs, or tables.

1. What geographic area defines your community?
2. What are your community's population, growth, and demographic characteristics?
3. Describe your key resident and other stakeholder segments, including differences among the segments.
4. What are your community's key offerings to its resident and stakeholder groups in quality of life (health, education, the economy, and any other aspects important to your community, e.g., safety or housing)?
5. Describe the key resident and other stakeholder requirements and expectations for your community.
6. What major facilities, infrastructure, and resources (e.g., technology, housing, transportation, workforce development resources, education resources, natural resources) support your community's key offerings?
7. Describe the key individuals, organizations, and groups (people resources) involved in delivering your community's key offerings.

## CORE GROUP DESCRIPTION QUESTIONS

Examiners will use the responses to these questions during the Award Evaluation phase. Responses to the questions have a 3,000-character limit and may include up to three charts, graphs, or tables.

1. What are your core group's mission, vision, and values or guiding principles?
2. What are the defining characteristics of your core group's culture?
3. What key individuals, organizations, and groups are involved in your core group, including who serves as the backbone organization?

4. What leadership system does your core group use to lead its community resilience and excellence efforts?
5. What are your core group's key programs and services?
6. Describe the individuals, organizations, and groups (people resources) involved in delivering your core group's programs and services and their key engagement drivers.
7. What are the key regulations that impact the delivery of your core group's program and services?

## COMMUNITY SITUATION QUESTIONS

Examiners will use the responses to these questions during the Award Evaluation phase. Responses to the questions have a 3,000-character limit and may include up to three individual charts, graphs, or tables.

1. What are your community's key strategic challenges, threats, advantages, and opportunities?
2. What are your core group's short- and longer-term key strategic objectives and most important related goals for your community, and how do they relate to your core group's mission and vision?
3. What are your core group's key short- and longer-term financial measures?
4. What are your key sources of comparative and competitive data regarding your community and your core group? Provide what limitations, if any, may affect your ability to obtain or use these data.
5. Is there anything you consider unusual about your community environment or community resilience and excellence model that would aid in understanding your community or your core group?

# 1 LEADERSHIP



The Leadership category asks about your performance and processes related to your core group’s communication, governance and accountability, ethical behavior, and succession planning.

## RESULTS QUESTIONS

Responses to the questions below should be consistent with the information shared in the corresponding CP questions. Each response has a 4,000-character limit and must include at least one chart, graph, or table (up to four may be provided). **All responses should contain three to five years of data and relevant comparisons. A detailed explanation must be provided if you are unable to provide a minimum of three consecutive points of trend of data and relevant comparisons.**

1. What are your results for your core group’s communication and engagement with other core group members, key resident and other stakeholder groups, and other key community leaders, organizations, and groups?
2. What are your results for your core group’s governance accountability?
3. What are your results for your core group’s legal and regulatory compliance and ethical behavior?

## PROCESS QUESTIONS

Process responses have a 3,000-character limit and may include up to three individual charts, graphs, or tables.

1. How do you determine and establish the group of individuals and organizations (your core group) responsible for leading and advancing results on behalf of the community?
2. How do leaders of your core group set and deploy the mission, vision, and values through your leadership system?
3. Describe your key process(es) for your-core group leaders’ two-way communication with other core group members, key resident and other stakeholder groups, and other key community leaders, organizations, and groups.

4. Describe your key process(es) for your core group's leadership succession planning.
5. Describe your key process(es) for ensuring responsible governance related to accountability for core group leaders' actions, fiscal accountability, and transparency.
6. Describe your key processes for ensuring ethical behavior in all core group activities and interactions.

## 2 STRATEGY



The Strategy category asks how you develop strategic objectives that are responsive to your community's challenges and opportunities. You are asked about your process for implementing those objectives and about metrics for checking progress. Strategic planning is a core process that directly affects a community's resilience and long-term success.

### RESULTS QUESTIONS

Responses to the questions below should be consistent with the information shared in the corresponding CP questions. Each response has a 4,000-character limit and must include at least one chart, graph, or table (up to four may be provided). **All responses should contain three to five years of data and relevant comparisons. A detailed explanation must be provided if you are unable to provide a minimum of three consecutive points of trend of data and relevant comparisons.**

1. What are your results for key measures or indicators of community performance related to community health?
2. What are your results for key measures or indicators of community performance related to education?
3. What are your results for key measures or indicators of community performance related to the economy?
4. What are your results for key measures or indicators of community performance related to any other quality of life aspects important to your community (e.g., safety or housing)?
5. What are your results for the impact of your strategy and action plans on your community's performance related to community health, education, the economy, and any other quality of life results key to community success?
6. What are your results for core group financial performance? (e.g. budgetary, return on investment, community savings, as appropriate)

**Note:** Comparisons for questions 1-4 should be top-decile, top-quartile, or best-in-class compared to similar communities, where available. Comparisons are optional for questions 5 and 6 above.

## PROCESS QUESTIONS

Process responses have a 3,000-character limit and may include up to three individual charts, graphs, or tables.

1. How do you conduct your strategic planning?
2. Describe how you collect and analyze relevant data and information for your strategic planning process.
3. How do you develop and deploy your action plans to achieve your strategic objectives referenced in the Community Profile above?
4. How do you evaluate the effectiveness of your strategy and implementation of action plans?
5. Describe how you identify strategic opportunities and pursue innovation through your strategic plan.
6. Describe how you ensure you have adequate financial and other resources to support and sustain your core group operations.

## 3 RESIDENTS AND OTHER STAKEHOLDERS



The Residents and Other Stakeholders category asks about your performance for key processes related to your residents and other stakeholders, including your programs and services, resident and other stakeholder satisfaction and dissatisfaction, and resident and other stakeholder relationship results.

### RESULTS QUESTIONS

Responses to the questions below should be consistent with the information shared in the corresponding CP questions. Each response has a 4,000-character limit and must include at least one chart, graph, or table (up to four may be provided). **All responses should contain three to five years of data and relevant comparisons. A detailed explanation must be provided if you are unable to provide a minimum of three consecutive points of trend of data and relevant comparisons.**

1. What are your results for resident and other stakeholder satisfaction by key resident and other stakeholder segments with your community?
2. What are your results for resident and other stakeholder dissatisfaction by key resident and other stakeholder segments with your community?
3. What are your results for resident and other stakeholder engagement by key resident and other stakeholder segments with your community?
4. What are your results for resident and other stakeholder satisfaction by key resident and other stakeholder segments with your programs and services?

### PROCESS QUESTIONS

Process responses have a 3,000-character limit and may include up to three individual charts, graphs, or tables.

1. Describe your key process(es) for listening to, interacting with, and observing residents and other stakeholders to obtain actionable feedback.
2. Describe your key resident and other stakeholder engagement process(es), which may include how you build and manage relationships with residents and other stakeholders.

3. Describe your key process(es) for building awareness of, attracting, and increasing participation in your core group's programs and services across key resident and other stakeholder segments.
4. Describe your key resident and other stakeholder support process(es), including how residents and other stakeholders may interact with the core group, seek information, and obtain support regarding your core group's programs and services.
5. Describe your complaint management process(es), including how you resolve complaints, recover resident and other stakeholder confidence, and prevent future complaints.

## 4 CORE GROUP INTELLIGENCE



The Core Group Intelligence (formerly Measurement, Analysis, and Knowledge Management) category asks about your processes for measuring, analyzing, and reviewing overall community performance, your core group's performance, and your core group's processes for managing information and knowledge assets.

### PROCESS QUESTIONS

Process responses have a 3,000-character limit and may include up to three individual charts, graphs, or tables.

1. Describe your process for tracking, analyzing, and reviewing overall community performance in quality of life.
2. Describe your process for tracking, analyzing, and reviewing your core group's performance and capabilities.
3. Describe your process for using the findings from your performance reviews to develop priorities for continuous improvement and opportunities for innovation for the community and the core group.
4. Describe your process(es) for collecting and sharing information with core group members, key resident and other stakeholder groups, and other key community leaders, organizations, and groups.

## 5 PEOPLE RESOURCES



The People Resources category asks about your performance for key processes related to engaging and developing the individuals, organizations, and groups engaged in doing the work of the core group. Results requested pertain to the performance of these processes as reflected in measures of engagement, training and development, and capacity. This category also asks about the development of your core group and community's current and future leaders, and the development of the individuals, organizations, and groups involved in the core group.

### RESULTS QUESTIONS

Responses to the questions below should be consistent with the information shared in the corresponding CP questions. Each response has a 4,000-character limit and must include at least one chart, graph, or table (up to four may be provided). **All responses should contain three to five years of data and relevant comparisons. A detailed explanation must be provided if you are unable to provide a minimum of three consecutive points of trend of data and relevant comparisons.**

1. What are your results for a supportive core group culture (e.g., trust in leadership, creating a sense of belonging, the individuals, organizations, and groups feel valued and respected, open communication, work-life balance, mission and value alignment)?
2. What are your results for your core group's people resources satisfaction and engagement with their participation in core group activities?
3. What are your results for training and development of your core group's people resources in alignment with the community's needs?
4. What are your results for people resource capacity?

### PROCESS QUESTIONS

Process responses have a 3,000-character limit and may include up to three individual charts, graphs, or tables.

1. Describe your key process(es) for fostering a culture of engagement and high performance.
2. Describe your key process(es) for core group and/or community leader training and development, learning, and succession planning.

3. Describe your key process(es) for building core group and the participating individuals, organizations, and groups' readiness to meet changing capability and capacity needs (e.g. increased demand for programs and services, changes to funding availability, unanticipated adverse events, etc.).

## 6 OPERATIONS



This category asks about how your core group designs, manages, and improves its programs and services and key processes, and ensures operational effectiveness and a safe and secure operating environment. Results requested pertain to the performance of your programs and services and the efficiency and effectiveness of your key processes.

### RESULTS QUESTIONS

Responses to the questions below should be consistent with the information shared in the corresponding CP questions. Each response has a 4,000-character limit and must include at least one chart, graph, or table (up to four may be provided). **All responses should contain three to five years of data and relevant comparisons. A detailed explanation must be provided if you are unable to provide a minimum of three consecutive points of trend of data and relevant comparisons.**

1. What are your results for the performance of the core group's programs and services?
2. What are your results in efficiency and effectiveness of your core group's key processes?

### PROCESS QUESTIONS

Process responses have a 3,000-character limit and may include up to three individual charts, graphs, or tables.

1. Describe your key process(es) for determining the core group's key program and service requirements.
2. Describe how the core group designs programs and services to meet those requirements.
3. Describe how you manage the efficiency and effectiveness of your processes and overall operations, and how you improve these processes.
4. Describe your overall approach to risk management and ensuring continuity of core group operations as well as overall community resilience and excellence efforts.
5. Describe your key process(es) for ensuring a safe and secure operating environment for the individuals, organizations, and groups engaged in your core group's efforts.



## BEST PRACTICES

This category asks about the processes and practices shared in all Categories (1-6).

### QUESTION

Of the processes shared, which (if any) do you consider best practices that other communities could learn from?

# SCORING RUBRIC

## RESULTS EVALUATION RUBRIC

	Levels (Le)	Trends (T)	Comparisons (C)	Integration (I)
4	Most relevant results demonstrate excellent performance.	Most results demonstrate sustained favorable trends or sustained high performance.	Most results demonstrate better than average performance with many achieving top quartile or better.	Most results reported for areas of importance.
3	Many relevant results demonstrate good-to-excellent performance.	Many results demonstrate sustained favorable trends or sustained high performance.	Many results demonstrate better-than-average performance, with some approaching top quartile.	Many results reported for areas of importance.
2	Some relevant results demonstrate good performance.	Some results demonstrate favorable trends or sustained high performance.	Some results demonstrate average performance using relevant comparisons.	Some results reported for areas of importance.
1	Little or no relevant results reported and/or results demonstrate inconsistent or marginal performance.	Limited, inconsistent, or adverse trends.	Little or no relevant comparative data are provided.	Little or no results reported for areas of importance.
*Relevant comparisons are (1) top decile/quartile, and (2) against competitors, where available.				

## PROCESS EVALUATION RUBRIC

	Approach (A)	Deployment (D)	Learning (L)	Integration (I)
4	Most approaches are systematic.	Deployment to most parts of core group is evident.	Most cycles of evaluation and improvement are fact-based. Instances of innovation, adoption of best practices, and sharing of refinements are evident.	Most approaches are aligned and integrated with strategic priorities and current and emerging community needs.
3	Many approaches are systematic.	Deployment to many parts of core group is evident.	Many cycles of evaluation and improvement are fact-based. Refinements and best practices are shared with other parts of core group.	Many approaches are aligned with community needs and strategic priorities.
2	Some approaches are systematic.	Deployment to some parts of core group is evident.	Some cycles of evaluation and improvement are evident.	Some approaches are aligned with community needs.
1	Approaches are being established.	Deployment is beginning to be evident.	Improvements are based on reacting to problems.	Approaches operate independently.

## GLOSSARY

**ANECDOTAL.** In response to a Criteria question, information that lacks specific methods, measures, deployment mechanisms, and evaluation, improvement, and learning factors.

**APPROACH.** The method your core group uses to carry out its process(es).

**BACKBONE ORGANIZATION(S).** One or more organizations that support the core group, serving as neutral facilitator(s) for the community resilience and excellence efforts. Its/their primary purpose is to provide a structured environment for individuals, organizations, and groups to convene, develop strategy, and accomplish goals.

**BENCHMARKS.** Processes and results that represent the best practices and best performance levels for similar activities, inside or outside your core group or community.

**COMMUNITY.** A group of people connected by geography, shared identity, common interests, or other forms of affiliation. For this award, community primarily refers to communities of place—such as neighborhoods, towns, cities, or regions—while recognizing that communities of practice, affiliation, and virtual engagement also influence outcomes and drive change.

**COMPARISON.** See RELEVANT COMPARISON.

**CORE GROUP.** A cross-sector group of individuals and organizations that leads and coordinates performance improvement efforts within a community. The core group reflects key community sectors and segments and includes residents, community members, and those who serve the community, including individuals with lived experience and informal leadership roles.

**DEPLOYMENT.** The extent to which your core group applies an approach in addressing the questions in the Criteria.

**DEVELOPING PATHWAY.** A performance improvement pathway that is more mature with processes that are more consistent and reliable while results are used to drive decision making.

**EFFECTIVE.** How well a process or measure addresses its intended purpose.

**ESTABLISHING PATHWAY.** A performance improvement pathway that is at the early stages of learning how a core group operates, while beginning to think about what results they want.

**FACT-BASED.** Supported by objective data, measurable evidence, and analysis to guide decisions.

**FAVORABLE TREND.** Sustained improvement or sustained high performance.

**INTEGRATION.** The harmonization of plans, processes, information, resource decisions, people resource capability and capacity, actions, results, measures, and analyses to support key community-wide goals.

**KEY.** Major or most important; critical to achieving your intended outcome.

**LEARNING.** New knowledge or skills acquired and implemented through evaluation, study, experience, and innovation.

**LEVELS.** Numerical information that places or positions your core group or community's results and performance on a meaningful measurement scale.

**MATURING PATHWAY.** A performance improvement pathway that is mature where processes are aligned/integrated, learning leads to improving while results are often high-performing and in some cases best practice, when compared to other core groups.

**OFFERINGS.** The features of your community that it is known for, that attract residents and other stakeholders, or both. Examples are good healthcare, world-class higher education, tourist attractions, a positive business environment, vibrant/livable

neighborhoods, strong ethnic heritage(s), theatre and arts, and natural resources.

**PATHWAY.** A pathway describes how a core group's management system develops over time as its processes become clearer, more disciplined, and more integrated.

**QUALITY OF LIFE.** The overall conditions and outcomes that influence the well-being of residents and the vitality of a community. Quality of life reflects the combined effects of social, economic, environmental, and physical factors that shape daily experience and long-term opportunity. For this award, quality of life is understood as a multidimensional concept that communities define, measure, and improve based on their unique context and priorities.

**RELEVANT COMPARISON.**

Benchmarks, competitors, best-in-class or top decile/top quartile, or stated core group or community targets.

**SYSTEMATIC.** Well-ordered, repeatable, and exhibiting the use of data and information so that learning is possible.

**TRENDS.** Numerical information that shows the direction and rate of change of your results or the consistency of its performance over a consecutive time period.