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# How can we fix our divided country? Pickle ball and sewing circles could help | Opinion

*3-minute read*

**Rich Baum** Special to the USA TODAY Network

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Step back for a moment from the post-election second-guessing and look at the common threads that the election revealed: that the United States has split into warring camps that barely understand each other; that, as noted in one recent poll, a large part of the electorate views the opposing political party as "downright evil;" that many have experienced social isolation and alienation which, at times, has turned into outright anger at others in their communities.

Underlying all these is a collapse in connections between — and compassion for — each other.

No one can wave a wand that will reverse deep-seeded social trends, but on this issue there is a way to take advantage of unused potential that exists almost everywhere in our country: community centers.

As the sociologist Robert Putnam wrote more than 20 years ago in his landmark book, "Bowling Alone," we have changed from a nation of joiners and connectors to a nation of people who stay home and view each other from a skeptical — and now often hostile — distance. Putnam presciently predicted that this trend would be a threat to democracy, writing that "democratic disarray" can be directly linked to erosion of civic engagement.

More recently, part of Putnam's proposed solution is to encourage people to join clubs, which he sees as a crucial way to creating bonds with those unlike ourselves, thus building trust, social capital, and a sense of common humanity. The sociologist Eric Klinenberg has further noted the importance of built spaces — such as libraries and parks — in facilitating the gatherings that create connections.

What's needed, in addition, are institutions that can take specific steps to catalyze the activities that compel people from all walks of life to get out of their homes and come together. In short, community centers. This doesn't mean only buildings that have the words "community center" in their names. It includes Ys, settlement houses, libraries, houses of worship and any place with staff and space that can be mobilized.

This is not a call for civics classes or self-improvement. The activities have to be fun, things that make people want to come together despite whatever has divided them in recent years: pickleball, collaging, book clubs, writing rooms, fantasy baseball, basketball leagues, knitting, volunteering. Notably, a recent academic study found that the most powerful interventions to reduce partisan animosity are those that present other individuals as "relatable, sympathetic individuals" or "highlight a common cross-partisan identity." These were found to be more effective than directly addressing the political issues underlie animosity.

I am the leader of an organization that began as a settlement house (that still exists), and now also includes two senior centers, a community center built around addiction recovery and a Jewish Community Center that serves a diverse neighborhood in downtown Manhattan. Our business, for more than a century, has been building connections and community, almost always across lines of race, religion and class. Our lived experience is that when we do the thoughtful, intentional work of creating a reason to connect, people seize the opportunity, love it and come back.

Our sewing circle extends back generations of Jewish, Asian, Hispanic and Black New Yorkers. Individuals in our addiction recovery center work with other volunteers from the community to distribute enormous amounts of food from the center's food pantry. One hundred random people showed up a few weeks ago to our joining fair to sign up for new clubs and activities. Are these activities alone the answer to all our country's problems? No. But, could they be part of the solution for a society that has become badly split and disaffected? Based on our experience, the answer is yes.

**Opinion:** I was unjustly deported. President Biden, I'm pleading for a chance to come home. Importantly, this is not just a political impulse, but also a real need for many individuals in our country. The epidemic of loneliness is well-documented and widespread. The surgeon general's recent report on loneliness laid out the evidence regarding the dramatic impact on health. Sen. Chris Murphy, Democrat of Connecticut, has introduced legislation to research and address loneliness, and it's also been a policy priority for Republicans like Rep. Mike Flood and Utah Gov. Spencer Cox.

With some simple, concrete steps we can start to address the fraying of our society:

First, community centers and other similar institutions with space and staff should step up and be part of a national effort to build community. They should poll their constituencies about their interests, assign marketing resources, and devote staff to getting activities off the ground. And, to mount a truly *effective* national effort, we should find a way to share innovative ideas and best practices.

Second, all levels of government and philanthropy should consider added funding for community centers that are committed to restoring our society and battling the epidemic of loneliness. Through attendance reports, it's very easy to measure success.

For the rest of us, as we think about how to react to the fraught moment in U.S. history, take these opportunities to connect. Come for the fun, stay for the chance to repair a badly fractured country.

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