

Patty Schachtner: A hope for strong communities this new year

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The holidays have unofficially wrapped up. When the ball dropped on New Year's Eve, we found ourselves in a new decade and with the hustle and bustle of the holidays behind us. Without holiday cards to expect or visits by grandkids or nieces and nephews, many of our neighbors are entering a period of loneliness- especially in rural areas like ours.

As a medical examiner, I have responded to deaths of those whose depression was brought on by this feeling of isolation and loneliness. That social isolation is too common and the winter creates a particularly difficult time for seniors. The lack of public transportation makes it hard for them to travel to church or their nearest senior center. Their relationships are even harder to maintain when the roads and sidewalks are unsafe. They are unable to contact children or other family from afar without access to reliable broadband. [An AARP loneliness study published in 2010 reported that over 42 million U.S. adults ages 45 and older were suffering from loneliness.](#)

This social isolation takes a toll on physical health, too. [Loneliness has been shown to increase risks of heart disease and stroke.](#) An AARP study has even found that a lack of social contacts among older adults is associated with [an estimated \\$6.7 billion in additional federal spending each year.](#) This is a cost we can avoid, and we can all benefit by addressing it.

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The [quality and quantity of our social relationships](#) has been shown to impact how

long we will live. Limiting the loneliness of others enriches us as well. So my hope for this New Year is that we will each strengthen and expand our social circles. Reach out to a relative you haven't heard from in a while or sit down with a new person for coffee after church. Share your stories, spread some love, and keep the social support networks in our communities strong. With this hope, may we all have the happiest of New Year's.

- Schachtner, D-Somerset, represents the 10th Senate District.