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[Back to square one for public service](#)

By [The Editorial Board](#) | Thursday, September 20, 2007, 04:16 PM

Forget about red states and blue states.

We're not as much a country divided by politics, religion and race, but rather a nation in retreat from the public square. Our retreat has allowed factional interests to set the political agenda. That won't change until people re-engage in public service.

That is the message that author and commentator Richard Harwood delivered to hundreds of Central Texans this week.

Americans, regardless of party, rank health care as the top domestic issue they want the presidential candidates to address, according to an August tracking poll by the Kaiser Foundation. Health care was trumped only by Iraq in terms of overall problems that government should address. Americans have clamored for leadership on that front for several years, but solutions remain elusive. Instead, Harwood said, politicians talk but don't deliver. Dashed hopes diminish public participation. Even so, people long for what Harwood calls "authentic hope." That's why we're hearing a lot about the politics of hope and unity in this presidential race. The question is whether the next president - or city council member, for that matter - will follow through.

Harwood is helping communities reconnect so they can obtain the kind of changes needed to improve their neighborhoods, local school boards, city councils, public schools, health care and economies. To that end, the United Way Capital Area with partners St. David's Community Health Foundation and HandsOn Central Texas on Wednesday launched the Community Engagement Initiative.

"We want to have a diverse community of engaged people doing meaningful hands-on community work," said David Balch, president of United Way Capital Area.

That is a worthy effort Central Texans should support. People can get involved by signing on to the initiative at www.unitedwaycapitalarea.org or calling (512) 472-6267. Goals are set high: Over the next three years, sponsors aim to engage 100,000 Central Texans in solving their communities' most pressing issues; 100 people will be trained as public innovators; and 300 volunteers will be trained as project leaders. They are making

scholarships available so that people from all walks of life can participate. The deadline to apply for scholarships and training is Oct. 1.

The 10-county Central Texas community served by the United Way is changing very rapidly. Austin has doubled its population over the past 20 years and is among the youngest cities in the country, with an average age of 28½ years old. Only 12 percent of the people who live in Austin grew up there, and other Central Texas communities are experiencing similar trends.

People don't know one another and tend to live and work in pockets. Communities can make bigger changes by working together on common issues. When the public and private sectors worked together on assisting Central Texas families with their tax returns last year, the effort brought families \$17 million in earned income tax credits, up from \$3 million three years ago, Balch said.

Now imagine the changes that 100,000 Central Texans can make in their communities by mentoring youngsters, building affordable housing and working with schools. That kind of engagement in our community takes us back to the public square.