

How to discover the best volunteer opportunity for you

By Rachel Lebeaux/Staff Writer

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When Barbara John retired from teaching math to high school students at Madison Park Technical Vocational High School at Roxbury Crossing last June, she knew she wasn't ready to stop educating others.

"As a Boston teacher, I felt I went into school and I did something good, and I came home and felt proud of myself," said the 66-year-old Newton Centre resident. "I knew that, in retiring, I'd really miss that sense of my own self-worth as being a valuable contributor, so I thought I really needed to figure out what I needed to do."

John found satisfaction in volunteering for the Deval Patrick campaign and through his inauguration this January. "I canvassed a lot — I'm good at it," John said, likening it to talking to a class. "But I think I want a little more responsibility in my next political [volunteer] job."

Enter Discovering What's Next, a nonprofit organization aimed at engaging mid-life and older adults in opportunities for learning and community involvement. DWN is offering a workshop this March, funded through a \$20,000 grant from the Massachusetts Service Alliance, to people 55 and over seeking help deciding whether, where and how to volunteer their time to the best benefit of themselves and those they help.

"We've heard from so many people that not everybody wants to volunteer, and among those who do, they often have a hard time finding the right fit," said Shirley Selhub, vice president of programming for DWN.

Oftentimes, volunteers will bounce from one assignment to another, completing tasks that are really not up to their skills level, such as stuffing envelopes. "This new generation is more and more interested in doing something that resembles what they did for work," Selhub said.

They might also wish to replicate the collegiality that they felt when they were working, Selhub said, but can't always get that through the one-on-one tasks to which they are sometimes assigned.

"When people go in for an interview, they very often hear what the role is, go in and start, and are never really clear about what the expectations are," Selhub said. "We expect people to come up with an agreement, so you're not disappointed later on."

The workshop is intended to "help people identify their calling, versus something that is more of a time-filler," said Amy Avergun, a volunteer developer of the workshop. "There is going to be a wealth of talent available," Avergun said. "Basically, when skilled professionals retire or cut back, they have a lot to offer, and it would be a real shame not to take advantage of that."

At the workshop, participants will examine their own needs and figure out what they are looking for in a volunteer opportunity they'll be able to stick with. "I think most people don't take the time to plan what they want to do and look inside," Selhub said. "We will point out things to consider."

John hopes the workshops will help her better define how to step up as a political activist in the next presidential election. "It may take more than just a workshop, but at least the workshop will allow me to define where I'm going," John said.

'Create your own volunteer experience'

Workshop for people 55+

Sponsored by Discovering What's Next

Tuesdays, March 20 and 27

9 a.m.-1 p.m.

Newton Free Library, Druker Auditorium

Free

Visit discoveringwhatsnext.com to download an application, or call 617-796-1419. Applications must be completed no later than March 6.