Meaning of Life

Cleveland Foundation's Encore program pairs senior citizens with volunteer and job opportunities.

Much is written these days about the nation's aging population and how the last of the baby boomers will soon turn 60. Issues facing this age group like the growing demand on the health care system and the uncertain state of Social Security draw lots of the attention. Yet this large demographic, with its longer life expectancies and more active lifestyles, is a group with time, energy and lots of experience to contribute.

Enter Encore Cleveland, a program launched in 2013 by the Cleveland Foundation, designed to channel the talents of retired people and connect them with a network of work and volunteer opportunities.

"Retirement today can look a lot different than it did in the past," says Kathy Hallissey, program director for leadership development with the Cleveland Foundation. "Many people want to stay active and engaged — volunteering or even working part time. The Cleveland Foundation recognized an opportunity to tap into the time, talent, experience and passion of older adults to help meet emerging and existing needs in Greater Cleveland."

This "win-win" situation takes many forms. Some participants find meaningful volunteer experiences at nonprofits, while others earn salaries or hourly wages at local businesses. Part-time and full-time opportunities are available. At the same time, participating organizations gain people with lifelong insight and experience.

The Cleveland Foundation funds 11 local organizations to advance this mission, including Greater Cleveland Volunteers, an agency that works with other nonprofit organizations promoting volunteer opportunities in Cuyahoga County. Communications Manager Dianna Kall helps connect participants with opportunities. "So many people want to volunteer, but they are not sure where to turn," she says. "People think it has to be a long-term commitment, but it doesn't."

She hopes more businesses will encourage their staff to do volunteer work. "It's a very healthy step for the entire community," she adds.

Encore Cleveland matches people with jobs in four major areas: employment, volunteering, business consulting and entrepreneurship. Local grantees of the Cleveland Foundation help make these connections. Some concentrate on finding the individual participants while others specialize in building the network of nonprofits and businesses seeking help.

Teaching, in one form or another, is a popular calling for participants. The Manufacturing Works Technical Corps brings experienced automotive, manufacturing and construction technicians together with students at Max S. Hayes High School and Euclid High School. Most instructors earn a part-time hourly wage.

"We are helping build a manufacturing pipeline," says Jessica Westropp, a senior manager at Youth Workforce Development. "For the most recent school year, there was a visible increase in student engagement, learning outcomes, and career opportunities."

Business consulting is another pathway for Encore participants. JumpStart Mentors connects experienced business volunteers with entrepreneurs in the city of Cleveland. "JumpStart has been greatly strengthened through Encore Cleveland," she says. "It is making it possible to attract a diverse group of highly talented mentors to deliver business assistance that helps our most promising entrepreneurs and small business owners."

For more information about Encore Cleveland, call 216-391-9032.