

U.S.-Japan Age-Friendly Communities Global Exchange

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As a “super-aged” society, more than 30 percent of Japan’s population today is 65 years old or older. In recent years, the national government, local authorities, and community groups have taken steps to address population aging and prepare for a future in which older adults make up a substantial and growing group. As a result, other communities have a chance to learn from Japan’s example.

In Columbus, Ohio, we have long been interested in effective practices for creating age-friendly communities. We recognize the importance of the built, social, and service environments, as well as the need for inclusion and participation of older residents in communities. The City of Columbus joined AARP’s Network of Age-friendly States and Communities and the World Health Organization’s Age-Friendly Cities and Communities program in 2016. Building on this commitment by the city and broader Franklin County in 2018, the Ohio State University College of Social Work created their Age-Friendly Innovation Center (AFIC) in 2021. AFIC works to innovate with older adults through research, education, and engagement, to build resiliency and make our communities more livable for people of all ages and abilities.

Recently, we had the opportunity to gain a firsthand view of Japan’s practices, when the Japan Center for International Exchange (JCIE) Healthy & Resilient Aging Program took an inaugural American delegation of elected officials, academics, and non-profit leaders from Columbus, Ohio to Tokyo and Kanagawa Prefecture in the Spring of 2023. Through generous support from the Japan Foundation and guidance from AARP Livable Communities and AARP International, members of AFIC and their partners engaged in mutual learning opportunities including presentations; discussions with elected officials, academics and older residents; and site visits in Japan.

The exchange began in Tokyo, where delegates had the opportunity to learn about the development of Japan’s community-based integrated care system from the Ministry of Health, Labour, and Welfare and the National Institute of Public Health. Delegates found Japan’s Universal Health Coverage and their national long-term care insurance system has more significant reach and engagement by citizens when compared with the U.S. aging network and health care



**Visiting the Shonan Robo Care Center/
Shonan Robo Terrace to learn how Japan is
using robotic assistive devices.**

supports. Every older Japanese citizen engages in a robust assessment process and has access to community services and supports at designated sites and programs across the country.

Increased longevity in Japan has fueled innovation, and private companies are working directly with older residents to develop new products suited to their specific needs. The delegation was able to experience this firsthand with cutting-edge products by Shonan Robocare Terrace, including robots for companionship and exoskeletons to support mobility after paralysis. Delegates also had the opportunity to experience virtual reality interventions developed by Silverwood company to support empathy-building for individuals with dementia.

We also visited Tokyo Rinkai Disaster Prevention Park to learn about Japan’s past responses to natural disasters, and how disaster preparedness remains part of everyday life for residents of all ages. Delegates participated in an earthquake simulation that required us to make decisions under emergency conditions and

explore a staged “city” that included hazards and opportunities for safe response. We discussed how cities cannot ignore issues of climate impacts and natural disasters as they strive to become more age-friendly, and how simulations can be effective in educating and preparing US residents.

In the Kanagawa Prefecture, participants heard from Governor Yuji Kuroiwa, a leader in supporting Age-friendly communities in Japan. He spoke about the concept of “ME-BYO” — which gauges conditions along a continuum that goes beyond binaries of “healthy” or “sick” — and shared a user-friendly App focused on healthy aging through diet, exercise, and social participation. We visited with Emerita Professor Hiroko Akiyama from the University of Tokyo, who shared how the Kamakura Living Lab serves as a model for community and resident-driven commercial solutions to support caregiving and older adults. Innovations included furniture to support working at home and mobility devices. Kamakura’s services and supports focused on social connection and integration as the primary driver of health and wellbeing, in contrast to the U.S. system which predominantly focuses on medical interventions for disease prevention and treatment.

The Japanese concept of *ikigai*, or living a life of purpose, remains important even in old age. This was evident as we visited the Sasayama Urban Renaissance Housing Complex, where students and older adults lived together in affordable housing properties, and a network of trained older adult volunteers provided “frailty checks” for neighbors living throughout Kanagawa. The *ikigai* concept extends to residents living with dementia as well. At the Imaizumi Care Center Program, individuals living with dementia engage in caretaking of green spaces throughout the city of Kamakura. Staff walk with residents to small parks, provide gardening tools and plants and support them while they tend to bushes and flowers. Program participants are free to groom the green spaces as they wish and they often engage with members of the community as they walk through the parks. Though U.S.-based programs may balk at liability risks of this practice, it was clear on our visit that participants were better integrated into the community through this caretaking. Finally, the Helte Company shared with the group a new online platform to

connect older people in Japan with individuals around the globe interested in learning the Japanese language.

Our collaboration continued in February of 2025 by hosting a delegation from Japan for a one-week study tour in Washington, D.C. and Columbus, Ohio, focusing on collaboration and dialogue on how both countries are working to address the shared challenges that come with population aging. •

Exchange Participants



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