

## 2023 US-Japan Program on Healthy and Resilient Aging

May 21–27, 2023

### Tokyo and Kanagawa Prefecture

Five leaders from Columbus, Ohio, who have been active in promoting healthy aging in their communities, travelled to Japan for a vibrant one-week exchange program focused on mutual learning about how to address the challenges and opportunities posed by population aging. The multisectoral delegation learned how Japan is approaching aging at the national, prefectural, and local levels. The trip featured site visits and exchanges with community leaders in Kanagawa Prefecture, which has become a leader in promoting the WHO's age-friendly cities framework, including a meeting with the prefecture's Governor Yuji Kuroiwa. Participants learned about a wide range of diverse initiatives that are addressing the needs of older people, including through programs designed to revitalize communities and promote social engagement, intergenerational housing initiatives, support for the development of assistive technologies, public-private partnerships for health-related innovation, and efforts for disaster preparedness and response. They also exchanged views and shared best practices with Japanese counterparts throughout the trip, including through a roundtable with academics at the University of Tokyo's Institute of Gerontology.



*Meeting residents of a daycare center for people with dementia*



*Governor Kuroiwa of Kanagawa speaks with the delegation*

#### **Program Participants**

**LOURDES BARROSO de PADILLA**, Member, City Council of Columbus, Ohio

**HOLLY LABELKO-SCHOENY**, Director of Research, Age-Friendly Innovation Center at Ohio State University

**MATTHEW MARTIN**, Director of Community Research, The Columbus Foundation

**MARISA SHELDON**, Director, Age-Friendly Innovation Center at Ohio State University

**KATIE WHITE**, Agency Director, Central Ohio Area Agency on Aging

## Summary of Discussions

### The Role of Community-Based Integrated Care

One of the recurring concepts that emerged throughout the exchange was the role of Japan's community-based integrated care system, which aims to provide a social safety net for older people, enabling them to age in place. A representative from the Ministry of Health, Labour, and Welfare outlined the history of this approach, highlighting the importance of Japan's emphasis on Universal Health Coverage (UHC) and its national long-term care insurance system in the development of community-based integrated care. Participants were struck by the consistency of information they received on the operation of the system and its important role for older people, from national-level ministries down to small-scale local nonprofits. They compared community-based integrated care centers (*chiiki houkatsu shien sentaa*) with the United States system of Area Agencies on Aging (AAA's), noting that AAA's cover a broader area, both geographically and substantively, but that the lack of UHC in the United States often creates barriers for older adults trying to access services. The delegation recognized how the presence of such a localized and well-understood system might help to reduce the stigma in accessing services, addressing the problem of people using emergency services to address crises better addressed by health services.

### Innovation for a 100-Year Life Society

"A 100-year life society is a gold mine of innovations"—a quote from Professor Hiroko Akiyama, a noted scholar on gerontological research at the University of Tokyo—was a phrase that resonated with many participants and was on display throughout the week. This idea that an older population is not just a problem to be solved but also a source of solutions itself was demonstrated to participants through Prof. Akiyama's Kamakura Living Lab project, which brings together community members, including older people, with private companies to solve problems and develop new products that meet the specific needs of local community members. The Living Lab was prescient in choosing to focus on products that would allow "work from home" well before the COVID-19 pandemic forced many to adopt this new work style. Of course, the Ohio delegation also had the chance to experience cutting-edge innovations, including a VR experience designed to build empathy for people with dementia and robots being used to assist and even rehabilitate people with mobility issues.



Prof. Holly Dabelko-Schoeny with Prof. Hiroko Akiyama



Interacting with companion robots at Shonan Robocare Terrace

## The Underappreciated Role of Civil Society

While there was much to learn from Japan's approach to its aging population, delegation members noted that Japan's civil society space was often underdeveloped, and perhaps also underappreciated, when compared to its important role in the United States. The lack of funding for civil society organizations and the absence of community foundations were both surprising to the delegation. However, while civil society organizations were often smaller in scale, it was still clear that they had a key role to play on the ground in supporting older people. During visits to local communities, nonprofits, often with volunteer staff, played a vital role in bringing together and empowering community members and older people themselves.

## Fostering Social Inclusion and Sense of Purpose

The concept of *ikigai*, or living a life of purpose, is one that has been gaining traction in the United States in recent years and was also evident as a driving principle for many of the activities that visitors from Columbus learned about throughout the week. The idea that social connection was a critical factor in healthy aging was praised by the group, who had ample opportunities to see this concept being put into action. During a visit to the Sasayama Urban Renaissance Housing Complex (a form of semipublic affordable housing), participants connected with university students and older adults who were living in the same community, and they noted that the dynamics between residents and local government officials were almost identical to those in the United States. They also expressed appreciation for projects that were centered on the autonomy of older people, including a local community that encouraged its older residents to launch clubs and programs such as one that fostered greater knowledge of local history, another that shared knowledge of traditional local agriculture, and another that encouraged people to help their neighbors through regular "frailty checks." Another program that participants found of tremendous interest was a program in which older adults with dementia participated in activities to care for their own community through cleaning public parks, pointing out that this and the local day-care center for people with dementia embodied the concept of "assisted living without walls."



*A member of the daycare center sharing her experiences with Councilwoman Lourdes Barroso de Padilla*



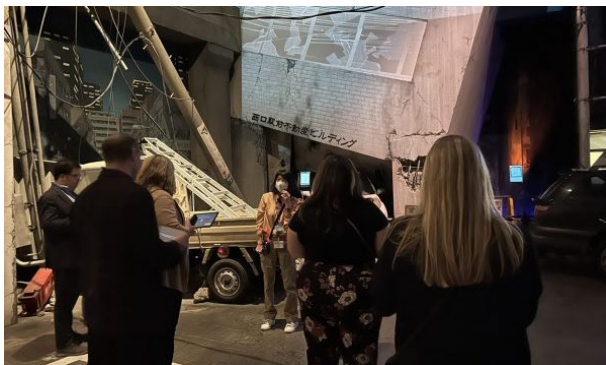
*The delegation shared some Ohio (OH) spirit with community volunteers*

## Responding to Natural Disasters

With this program being followed by the hottest June and July globally on record, it is becoming clear that responding to extreme climate events is going to become a critical issue. The group from Columbus was particularly aware of how vulnerable older people can be in the face of such events, as their community has faced a number of extreme heat events, power outages, and flooding in recent years. While in Japan, they learned about how older people were likewise disproportionately affected by both the March 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake that struck Tohoku and the 1995 Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake. During a visit to Tokyo Bosai Rinkai Disaster Prevention Park, participants were briefed by an expert from the National Institute of Public Health and learned about some of Japan's approaches to natural disasters and the need to develop clear community response plans that specifically address the needs of older people.

## Addressing the Causes of Population Decline

While population aging is a concern in both Japan and the United States, Columbus, Ohio, is in fact a very young and rapidly growing city; its average age is only 32 years old—a fact that astounded many of the local government leaders with whom the group met. As such, great interest was also expressed in learning from Japan about the causes of population decline and whether it might be possible to avoid an inverted population pyramid. Among the topics that came up through this discussion was the question of Japan's immigration policy, as well as the role of women in society in Japan and the disproportionate burden that is placed on women in terms of housework, child rearing, and caring for aging parents.



*Participants learn about Japan's approach to disaster response and preparedness*



*A quick visit to the Great Buddha of Kamakura at Kotoku-in*



*Marisa Sheldon presenting to researchers at the University of Tokyo*



*Sharing "Omiyage" with the people of Miura*

## Conclusion

Following the trip, participants expressed their intention to take what they learned in Japan and carry it forward into their work in the future, whether that be through teaching a class on global aging that features Japan, in their policymaking, the programs they carry out, or how they provide funding and services to their community. The program also helped to strengthen the groups understanding of Japan's unique approaches to its aging population as well as areas where Japan and the United States might continue to work together to allow people to stay healthy and resilient as they age. A few thoughts delegates shared with us in feedback surveys are shared below:

*"I have always viewed Japan as a leader in aging and do even more so now after this experience. Learning from researchers, elected officials, professionals, and older residents themselves showcased the innovation and dedication to creating a great place to grow old and be old."*

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*"As I reflect on this experience, my overall takeaway has been hope and inspiration. As the US is years behind in becoming a super-aged society, it was clear to me that we have a lot of work to do...This experience was a dream come true as a gerontologist and leader in direct service provisions. I will also be able to share these great learnings in the course I teach at Ohio State, Global Aging."*

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*"I am incredibly grateful for this opportunity and believe it will shape my work now and in the future."*

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*"Thank you to the JCIE team for all of the work that went into planning this exchange. The information learned and experience gained will help transform the aging landscape in Central Ohio."*



*Report prepared by Stephen McHugh.  
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