

2025 US-Japan Program on Healthy and Resilient Aging

December 1-5, 2025

Tokyo, Shiki City, and Kumamoto Prefecture

Five leaders from San Diego County, California, who have been active in promoting healthy aging in their communities, travelled to Japan for a one-week exchange program focused on mutual learning around the challenges and opportunities posed by population aging. The multisectoral delegation was able to hear about and observe how Japan is approaching aging at the national, prefectural, and local levels, and particularly how the country is addressing the needs of older people before, during, and after disasters strike.

In addition to meetings in Tokyo, the trip featured a day of exchanges with community leaders in the town of Shiki, Saitama Prefecture, and then three days of meetings and site visits in Kumamoto Prefecture. They visited Kumamoto City and the town of Mashiki, which are still recovering from two massive back-to-back earthquakes that struck nine years ago. The area is also experiencing a rapid influx of foreign residents thanks to recent international investments in chip manufacturing in the region, and is working to better integrate that population in its plans for a more resilient society.

Program Participants

PALOMA AGUIRRE, Supervisor and Chair Pro Tem, San Diego County Board of Supervisors

JENNIFER BRANSFORD-KOONS, Director, Aging & Independence Services (AIS),
Public Administrator/Public Guardian, County of San Diego Health and Human Services Agency

JULIE JEAKLE, Acting Director, Office of Emergency Services, County of San Diego

MICHELLE MATTER, Director of Aging, San Diego State University (SDSU) Center for Excellence
in Aging and Longevity (CEAL)

DANA TOPPEL, CEO, Jewish Family Service of San Diego



Posing with participants at a “Kayoinoba,” or “Community Gathering Place.”



Meeting with Mr. Takefumi Kagawa, mayor of Shiki

Summary of Discussions

Community Initiatives to Proactively Promote Health

The delegation witnessed and participated in a number of health promotion activities targeting older residents, and they were impressed by the fact that these activities aimed at building muscle and preventing sarcopenia (muscle loss associated with aging) were deeply embedded in communities throughout Japan. During a visit to the town of Mashiki, located just outside of Kumamoto City, the delegation joined a “beauty walking” health promotion class organized by staff from the Jikoukai Social Welfare Corporation. The sessions are held regularly at the grounds of a local shrine, and the elder participants put our delegation and staff members to shame with their strength and stamina. Similarly, they visited the suburban town of Shiki, outside of Tokyo, which has created a program to encourage residents to get out and walk. Residents receive a pedometer, download an app, and then “check in” at sites around town to record their steps. They can also earn points through volunteer work or participating in other activities. Once they earn a certain number of points, they receive a voucher that can be used at local shops. The town was able to see an impact in terms of reduced annual health costs, and the delegation was interested in bringing a similar idea to San Diego.

Addressing Social Isolation through Purposeful Engagement

One of the shared concerns between the United States and Japan is the challenge of social isolation. Former Minister of Health Keizo Takemi shared with the delegation that 44 percent of households in Japan are expected to be single-person households by 2030, and that Japan had recorded about 22,000 solitary deaths in the past year. The delegation visited a community-based integrated support center, which is staffed by social workers, registered nurses, and others who make sure that residents get the care they need, whether medical care or social care, for example, by referring them to *kayoinoba*, community “salons” that offer resident-led activities or other programs. The *kayoinoba* offer opportunities for new friendships and connectivity. Neighborhood associations and *minseiin*—a “commissioner for livelihood affairs” who is a local resident appointed by the association to serve as a consultant and advocate for their neighbors—also play a vital role in ensuring the well-being of the community members.

A key aspect of addressing social isolation was creating programs that fostered a sense of “*ikigai*”—the concept of having a sense of purpose in life—among participants. The delegation noted how Japanese communities promoted *ikigai* through the various activities they observed, whether it was the sewing club or gardening club organized by residents in Shiki, the hundreds of trained volunteers in Kumamoto city who serve as “preventive care supporters” or “dementia supporters” (Kumamoto Prefecture has the largest number of people trained to serve as dementia supporters in the country), or Mashiki’s NPO known as “Team Yasunaga” (based at Jikoukai) that offers intergenerational programs that bring students together with older residents to clean the grounds of a local shrine, or to plant vegetables and then cook them together.

Viewing Japan's Health and Long-Term Care Insurance Up Close

Prior to the trip, the delegation received a briefing on Japan's healthcare and long-term care insurance system from a representative of Japan's Ministry of Health. They were able to then see the system in practice in various settings, including community-based integrated support centers, daycare centers, and a visit to a modern assisted living facility where the cost for a private room was only about \$1,000 per month for those with the national insurance and the staff-to-patient ratio was 1:3. A delegation member noted that even the full cost without insurance was less than a fifth of what her own parent was paying in a similar facility in the United States.

The focus on prevention, while also having a more robust health insurance and long-term care insurance system, was particularly notable as a way to reduce the cost burden on the system. And indeed, the availability of these insurance systems made it easier to encourage people to strive to improve their health where possible. The delegation noted that one woman they spoke to had been able to recover from a previous health issue and was no longer using the long-term care insurance—progress that she was quite proud of. Similarly, the goal at Jikoukai's rehabilitation facility was to ensure that people return to being self-reliant. And the mayor of Mashiki stressed exercise, sports, and community as being key to healthy longevity, sharing that he was trying to model that behavior and planned to run a marathon next year.



Sharing perspectives with Mayor Hironori Nishimura of Mashiki



Participants meet Mr. Kazufumi Onishi, mayor of Kumamoto



Admiring the scope of the world's largest underground floodwater diversion facility



Joining residents for "Sumo stomps" during a regular exercise session hosted at a local shrine

Ensuring the Wellbeing of Older People During and After Natural Disasters

Preparedness and response: In 2016, Kumamoto Prefecture experienced two earthquakes within 28 hours that were over 7M. Here again, prevention was a key message that was repeatedly emphasized during meetings with various city officials in Kumamoto City and the town of Mashiki, as well as in Shiki, which is a flood-prone region. Mayor Kazufumi Onishi of Kumamoto noted that older evacuees after the previous earthquakes had been filled with anxiety and concerns, so his team was working to increase preparedness efforts. They also heard from the city's disaster prevention team about those efforts, including the system for registering people in need of assistance in evacuations, which currently includes more than 35,000 people, for whom individualized evacuation plans have been created. Those people are then assisted by the volunteer fire brigade members when a disaster occurs, working in coordination with the *minsein*.

In terms of disaster response, the US delegation was surprised to learn that unlike in the United States, ambulance rides to the emergency room were free. But they also heard that paramedics are limited in what medical services they can provide, although this has been improving in recent years. Another area discussed was the difficulty that first responders face in dealing with individuals who have dementia, autism, and other disabilities. This was an area where San Diego has been in the lead, and the County's Office of Emergency Services was able to share videos they had prepared that offer advice on how to engage with those who might have cognitive or other impairments.

Post-Disaster Recovery: The delegation also visited sites that helped them understand the process and priorities of the region during the recovery period. In Kumamoto City, they learned about the painstaking efforts underway to restore the city's historic castle to its original state. In Mashiki, they visited a community center that was built next to the town hall (which was also rebuilt in 2023 with the latest anti-earthquake technology). It was created as a bus stop, a gathering spot, and a location for remembrance. They heard about a community-building council (*machizukuri kyōgikai*) that had worked together with the NPO Team Yasunaga to propose ways to improve the town as they rebuilt.

Finally, they heard about the system of temporary housing after disasters. The delegation was amazed to hear that wooden houses had been built within two months of the disaster in Kumamoto, which they learned was made possible because sites are pre-selected that can be used and that can quickly be connected to utilities. Advance arrangements are also made with local carpenters, manufacturers, and builders to facilitate the process, and some regulations are waived since the buildings are intended to be temporary. These temporary houses are fully covered by national-level funding, and no rent is charged (residents pay for their own utilities). The complexes built in Kumamoto incorporate a "Home for All" (*minna no ie*), a community gathering space built with exposed wood and tatami to make it feel more like home.

Multilingualism

Finally, one point that counterparts in Kumamoto were eager to hear about was San Diego's experience in dealing with a multilingual community. The prefecture has been experiencing a major expansion of semiconductor and related industries (in particular, Taiwan's TSMC) in the region, which has meant that the number of foreigners has increased five-fold in two years. As a result, they recognize the need to provide health, disaster-related, and other services that can reach those residents. San Diego offers a wealth of experience in this area as more than 50 languages are spoken in San Diego County. Their Emergency Management publications are offered in 12 languages (including Japanese), and they also work with community coalitions to target specific communities to improve prevention.



Posing with first responders at the Kumamoto City Disaster Prevention Center



Visit to Kumamoto Castle to observe reconstruction efforts after the 2016 earthquake



Meeting with residents and observing the local sewing club



Observing Shiki residents engaging in strength training activities



Learning about efforts to memorialize the 2016 earthquake at a community space in Mashiki



Visiting a community center created for residents in temporary housing after the 2016 earthquake

Conclusion

This program provided participants with the unique opportunity to learn through firsthand experience about Japan's approaches to supporting its aging population. Participants came away with numerous lessons that they plan to carry forward, whether small interventions such as providing weights to promote muscle building at community exercise classes, or significant policy changes to promote housing availability in post-disaster situations. They also identified multiple areas for future collaboration between San Diego and Kumamoto, including around transportation and ways to address the needs of an increasingly diverse and multilingual community. The delegation returned home with a great deal of knowledge and new connections and are eagerly looking forward to hosting a delegation from Kumamoto Prefecture in San Diego in the coming year. Below is feedback shared with us by some of the delegates:

"I have always had a positive view of Japan's approach to supporting an aging population, but this experience solidified many of those beliefs. At the same time, I observed challenges that mirror those we face in the United States, which reinforced how much we can learn from one another. The program highlighted the importance of global connection and knowledge exchange in addressing shared issues related to aging, health, and social connection."

"One of the biggest takeaways from the program was how simple, low-cost approaches such as shared spaces, light exercise, informal gatherings, and intergenerational connections, are intentionally used to reduce isolation and support health. These strategies felt both practical and deeply human, reinforcing that meaningful connection does not require complex infrastructure..."

"The focus on prevention - particularly frailty and isolation - was very impactful... My goal will be to look for more opportunities to focus on the reduction of frailty and isolation by focusing on more neighborhood solutions."



Exchanging business cards with officials from Kumamoto Prefecture



Discussion with volunteers working on frailty prevention



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