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Of, By and For Seniors: Japanese Seniors Co-operatives

Japanese families are getting smaller while the ranks of the aged are growing. A co-operative has stepped into this vacuum, connecting thousands of elders who have something to give and something to receive.

Tanaka Michiko age 76, came in to change sheets at NewGreen Nursing Home in Kawasaki, Japan, “just to help” the other members of the cooperative linen- changing crew. Residents and staff beamed when they saw her, and she had something to say to each person she encountered. Tanaka had undergone stomach surgery six weeks earlier and lost more than 25 pounds. But Ito Aiko, crew chief, couldn't keep her away.

Tanaka was able to find work, take time off for surgery, recover at home with the help of home health care aides, and return to work, all at her own pace, because she is a member of Japan's new senior co-operative.

Koreikyo, or Seniors Co-operative, is a hybrid consumer and worker co-operative of, by, and for seniors. Its mission is to help seniors remain in their homes as long as possible. The co-op gets frail seniors the help they need to stay independent and helps able seniors—who often face age discrimination—find work that pays, keeps them active, and adds meaning to their lives. Members can both provide services and receive them, as Tanaka did.

Koreikyo, Japan's first (and so far only) seniors' co-operative, was started in 1995 by a retired labor organizer in his 70s who was suffering from diabetes. Because of his health challenges, Nakanishi Goshu looked for ways seniors might help themselves by helping each other. Nakanishi was among those who founded the Elderly and Chronically Unemployed Peoples' Union in the early 1970s.

By May 2000, more than 27,000 seniors had joined Koreikyo chapters around Japan, and today Koreikyo has more than 100,000 members and a chapter in each of the country's 47 provinces. The goal is 1 million members.

Eroding family support

Koreikyo's growth is one sign that the co-op is tapping into the profound needs created by Japan's shifting demographics.

“I don't have any children of my own; I never married,” says Yoshida Kyoko, age 78, another member of the linen-changing crew at NewGreen Nursing Home.

During World War II, Japan lost nearly 3.3 million young men. As a result, more than 2 million women did not marry and raise children. This group of women, Yoshida among them, cared for elderly parents. But now that they are in need of long-term care, many lack families to care for them. About half of Japan's aged continue to live with their families, but falling birth rates suggest that extended family living will be less a part of Japan's future. Yet, as in the U.S., the number of the elderly continues to grow.

“Without a family of my own, this chance to work here and rely on Koreikyo means a great deal to me,” Yoshida says.

Owned by seniors, serving seniors

All Koreikyo members make a one-time purchase of a capital share in the co-op when they join (about \$50 U.S., which is returned to members when they leave the co-op). They also pay an annual \$30 membership fee, which includes a newsletter subscription. Their investment entitles them to the services their chapter provides.

Typical of co-operatives everywhere, Koreikyo is run democratically. Members elect a board of directors and officers. What makes Koreikyo unusual is the way it combines features of both consumer cooperatives, which are common in Japan, and worker co-operatives, which are not.

A “pay-as-you-go” ticket system functions as a kind of care-giving and -receiving currency. Members buy books of tickets, and as they use co-op services, they turn over the appropriate number of tickets to the co-op member providing the service. Service providers in turn redeem the tickets they've collected for their pay—or use the tickets to pay for services they receive. The co-op retains a small amount from each transaction to pay staff and to finance expansion.

Koreikyo members debate how much of its resources should be devoted to commercial services and how much to activities members enjoy with each other for their own sake. But Koreikyo offerings transcend such distinctions, as I learned when I met Uchida Hiroshi at the Kanagawa chapter office. He and his wife became members so Mrs. Uchida, who has diabetes, could use Koreikyo's transportation service to get to and from her twice-weekly dialysis treatments. Koreikyo transportation is a bit cheaper than taxis, and the couple prefers the personal touch and safety of the co-op drivers.

The day I met him, Uchida was at the co-op office looking for an activity for himself. “I've lived in this area for a long time, but I haven't been involved locally,” he said. “It is much more difficult for men than women. Everything is about work for men. But you can't just stay home all the time watching TV. You'll go boke (senile) in no time.”

Koreikyo members do lots of activities together, not all of them exactly what one might think would be part of a business. In addition to their home-helper service, nursing home assistance, and transportation for health care appointments, the Kawasaki chapter offers clothing re-tailoring and home repair and renovation. It also offers touring and hobby groups (knitting, doll-making), social service volunteer opportunities, reading and discussion circles, fund-raising activities for Koreikyo and charitable institutions, and newsletter publishing. In other parts of the country, chapters cook and deliver home meals, and run daycare centers for seniors and assisted living centers.

Koreikyo is also becoming an educational institution. In 2000, the Japanese government instituted a long-term nursing care insurance program that reimburses families for home helper services. The catch? Only certified home helpers could be paid, and not members of one's own family. Overnight, the program created an immense demand for home-helper training that would lead to certification. Koreikyo members started programs to train and certify themselves as home helpers, and then opened these programs to the general public.

Reshaping aging

There is no mass-membership organization for Japan's elderly such as AARP in the United States. Koreikyo staff has set a long-term goal of making Koreikyo that kind of advocate for Japan's elderly. In the meantime, Koreikyo has become a force that is changing the daily lives of the elderly more intimately than any advocacy group could.

“It is so important for people to help each other and do things together,” says Uchida.

“This is really the principle behind co-operatives, whether consumer co-operatives or medical co-ops or senior co-ops. What can people do together—that's what we have to discover.”

In offering elders not only services and employment but independence, meaning, and connection, Koreikyo is reshaping the nature of aging in Japan.

Robert Marshall teaches anthropology at Western Washington University. He has been studying cooperation and co-operatives in Japan since 1989 and worked at the Kawasaki Koreikyo during the summer and fall of 2002. All names, except Nakanishi Goshu's, have been changed.