

WELFARE

Helping the elderly, the young, and the disabled

Welfare for Older People

With advances in medical technology and improvements in public health and nutrition, the average life span of the Japanese people has markedly increased. As the elderly population expands, the number of bedridden and senile persons who require care is growing rapidly. It is estimated that by 2060, one in 2.5 people will be 65 or older, and one in four will be 75 or older (advanced elderly). The number of older Japanese requiring care will also rise as a result.

Aggravating society's care problem is the fact that the average family's ability to provide such care is decreasing, partly because of the ongoing transition from extended to nuclear family patterns. In response to these circumstances, the government is reorganizing the welfare system for the elderly together with medical services for those elderly requiring care. As part of this reorganization, in 2000 a long-term care insurance system was inaugurated as a new social insurance system.

Welfare measures for the benefit of elderly persons are carried out on the basis of the Social Welfare Service Law for the Elderly (Rojin Fukushi Ho), enacted in 1963. Provisions of the Health and Medical Service Law for the Elderly (Rojin Hoken Ho), enacted in 1982 are also relevant to maintaining and protecting elderly persons' physical and mental health.

Welfare measures for the benefit of elderly persons, together with those which benefit children and handicapped persons, are administered by local-governments, welfare offices (*fukushi jimusho*) in particular.



An elderly man in a wheelchair

To provide relevant assistance and advice, these offices employ certified social workers (*shakai fukushi shuji*) with specialized knowledge and skills. Working in collaboration are commissioned welfare volunteers (*minsei iin*), who try to gain an accurate understanding of the situation of elderly persons in their geographical areas and who assist the local welfare offices with their work. Welfare facilities for elderly persons needing special care include day service centers, nursing homes for the elderly (*kaigo rojin hoken shisetsu*), special nursing homes for the elderly (*tokubetsu yogo rojin homu*), and group homes for elderly with dementia (*chihosei koreisha gurupu homu*).

To cope with the aging of society in the 21st century, the Japanese government instituted the Ten-Year Strategy to Promote Health Care and Welfare for the Elderly (commonly known as the Gold Plan) in 1989. This plan was revised in 1994 under the name New Gold Plan. The New Gold Plan made various improvements by fiscal 1999, including an increase in the number of home helpers for elderly persons, improvements in the capacity of short-stay facilities to accept

them for periods of rest and special care, the offering of day services (including meals and physical exercise) at day service centers, and an expansion of at-home services such as visits by doctors and nurses who provide special care and guidance in physical exercises for regaining impaired functions. Three bills to create a long-term care insurance system for the elderly were approved in the Diet in December 1997, and the new system became effective in April 2000. Since then the use of most of the above-mentioned facilities and services has been provided via the long-term care insurance system.

Another new plan, known as Gold Plan 21, was launched in 2000. The specific measures envisioned by this plan are: (1) improving the foundation of long-term care services, (2) promoting support measures for the senile elderly, (3) promoting measures to revitalize the elderly, (4) developing a support system in communities, (5) developing long-term care services which protect and are trusted by users, and (6) establishing a social foundation supporting the health and welfare of the elderly.

Children's Welfare

The first basic law related to children and their welfare was the Child Welfare Law (*Jido Fukushi Ho*), enacted in 1947. According to this law, "children" (*jido*) are defined as young persons under the age of 18. There are three sub-categories: infants of less than one year of age, who are officially called "nurslings" (*nyuji*); children aged one year or more who have not yet entered elementary school, known as *yoji*; and children from elementary-school age through the age of 17, who are called *shonen*.

In accordance with the Child Welfare Law, each of Japan's 47 prefectures operates several child guidance centers (*jido sodanjo*). Each of these centers employs child welfare workers (*jido fukushishi*) who have received specialized training and are available for consultation on all sorts of matters concerning children in the areas under each center's

jurisdiction. They make systematic inquiries and decisions from a specialist's viewpoint, give necessary guidance to children's guardians, and authorize arrangements for the temporary custody of children by foster parents or for the entry of disadvantaged children into residential welfare facilities. Such arrangements are made in close consultation with welfare offices and health centers (*hokenjo*).

City, town, and village governments employ commissioned child welfare volunteers (*jido iin*) who, in cooperation with the child welfare workers and certified social workers, try to gain an adequate understanding of the living environment of children, pregnant women, and new mothers who need assistance. Public facilities for the special care of children include homes for infants (*nyujiin*), day nurseries (*hoikusho*), and hospital homes for children with severe mental and physical disabilities.

The Child Welfare Law underwent large-scale revisions in 1997. These were made in order to respond to changes in the living environment of children during the last 50 years. Examples of such changes are the now predominant pattern whereby both husbands and wives work to maintain the family income; the trend toward nuclear families with no more than two generations per household; and the decrease in the number of children, with a total fertility rate (average number of children estimated to be born to each woman during her lifetime) of only 1.44 in 2016. The revisions in the Child Welfare Law emphasize going beyond the concepts of protection and emergency relief to address the issue of supporting children in ways that will help them become socially, spiritually, and economically self-reliant by the time they are young adults.

The revised law provides for the establishment of support centers for households with children (*jido katei shien senta*), which work with the child guidance centers and give many types of advice and guidance for children in their area. The names and functions of some types of facilities have been changed to emphasize "self-reliance" (*jiritsu*) rather than just custodial care. For example, the former "homes for training and education of juvenile delinquents" (*kyogoin*)



have been renamed “children’s self-reliance support facilities” (*jido jiritsu shien shisetsu*), and “homes for fatherless families” (*boshiryo*) have been renamed “livelihood support facilities for mothers and children” (*boshi seikatsu shien shisetsu*).

For single-mother households, necessary measures, along with those already in place under the Child Welfare Law, were facilitated by the Law for the Welfare of Fatherless Families and of Widows (Boshi Oyobi Kafu Fukushi Ho), enacted in 1964.

Prior to the revision of the Child Welfare Law, a 10-year agenda, officially named Basic Orientations to Assist Child-Raising and colloquially known as the Angel Plan, was jointly put together in 1995 by the Education, Health and Welfare, Labor, and Construction ministries. Since one of the reasons for the trend toward smaller families is the growing presence of women in the workplace, this plan aims to build an environment that makes it possible for women to feel confident that they can raise children while holding jobs. Among the various measures promoted were the expansion of the capacity of day nurseries, a lengthening of the hours during which day nurseries are open, and a large increase in the number of child-rearing support centers (*kosodate shien senta*) throughout Japan.

The Angel Plan was revised in 1999 to create the New Angel Plan, which expanded numerical targets for various types of care facilities. In 2003 the Law for Measures to Support the Development of the Next Generation (Jisedai Ikusei Shien Taisaku Suishin Ho) was passed. Covering the 10-year period beginning 2005, this law prescribes guidelines for formulating action plans by the national government, local governments, and business operators to develop the environment necessary to bring up healthy children. This law (Act on Advancement of Measures to Support Raising Next-Generation Children) has been extended for ten years until March 31, 2025.

The prevention of child abuse has become an increasingly prominent issue, with the number of reported cases growing rapidly in the past decade. The Child Abuse Prevention Law went into effect in 2000 and was revised in 2004. This revision expanded the criteria under which people are obligated

to make a report to a child guidance center, and it clarified the authority of center personnel to make on-site investigations. The bill was further amended in 2019 to explicitly ban corporal punishment by parents and create a plan to boost the number of child welfare centers in major cities.

Welfare for Disabled Persons

Public welfare measures for handicapped persons are carried out on the basis of the Law for the Welfare of Physically Disabled Persons (Shintai Shogaisha Fukushi Ho), enacted in 1949; the Law for the Welfare of Mentally Handicapped Persons (Chiteki Shogaisha Fukushi Ho), enacted in 1960; and the Law concerning Basic Policies for the Handicapped (Shogaisha Kihon Ho), enacted in 1970. These laws apply to measures for people of age 18 and over since handicapped persons under the age of 18 are covered by provisions of the Child Welfare Law.

Welfare measures for physically handicapped persons are administered by local governments, particularly through welfare offices and rehabilitation consultation centers for physically disabled persons (*shintai shogaisha kosei sodanjo*). At these offices and centers, persons with specialized knowledge and skills consult with physically handicapped persons. They are assisted in their work by commissioned welfare volunteers (*minsei iin*) and consultants for physically disabled persons (*shintai shogaisha sodan'in*), appointed by city, town, and village governments.

Persons designated as physically handicapped are entitled to various public welfare services, including consultation and guidance, special rehabilitation and medical services, the replacement or repair of auxiliary equipment and devices, and accommodation in various types of rehabilitation facilities. For those who are

Entrance to Tokyo Metropolitan Government building

Tokyo government has been crafting their own ordinances to make lodging and public facilities barrier free, going above and beyond national laws in preparation for the 2020 Olympics and Paralympics.



seriously disabled, services may include grants or loans of bathtubs, chamber pots, specially designed beds, and word processors, as well as the dispatch of home helpers and medical personnel for at-home examinations.

To help disabled persons to be self-reliant in society, central and local governments provide economic assistance by purchasing items which they manufacture, and various types of activities have been devised to respond to disabled persons' needs in ways that facilitate their participation in society. Allowances for people with special disabilities (*tokubetsu shogaisha teate*) are provided to help disabled persons be economically self-reliant, and there are special pensions through a system of support and mutual help for people with mental and physical disabilities.

In the case of physically or mentally handicapped children, special child-rearing allowances (*tokubetsu jido fuyo teate*) are provided to legal guardians who raise these children at home. Allowances are rated according to the extent of the disabilities. Educational facilities include schools for blind persons, schools for deaf persons, residential schools where special care is provided, and special classes within public schools. In recent years it has become more common for handicapped children to receive education together with normal children in ordinary schools.

Emphasis is also given to measures aimed at preventing the development of handicaps. For example, in keeping with the provisions of the Maternal and Child Health Law (Boshi Hoken Ho), enacted in 1965, health examinations and guidance are provided to pregnant women.

In Japan, as in other countries, the concept of "normalization" has received increasing attention in recent years. The aim of normalization is to create a barrier-free society where handicapped persons can be self-reliant and engage freely in social activities in their local communities. Addressing this task, in December 1995 the Japanese government put together the Government Action Plan for Persons with Disabilities: Seven-Year Normalization Strategy. Under this plan an effort was made

to promote the independence of persons with disabilities and help them to live in communities as ordinary citizens. A new plan launched in 2003 continues this focus and expands the numerical targets for home helpers, day service centers, group homes, etc.

Spread of Universal Design

Universal design is based on the idea of every place being freely and easily accessible to anyone.

In the case of public transportation facilities in Japan, elevators are placed in railway stations and there are "non-step" buses that passengers can enter or exit without climbing or descending stairs. This makes it possible for everyone to easily use public transportation. The government provides support to those acquiring or renovating barrier-free housing, and the standard specification has been established that public rental accommodations must be barrier free. Facilities in parks and other public places have also been improved, eliminating entrance steps and sidewalk height differences and installing toilet facilities that everyone can use easily and comfortably, thereby promoting the creation of facilities that people can use safely.

Local governments nationwide are also promoting initiatives to foster communities that incorporate the concept of universal design. Meanwhile, private companies are focusing on product development based on universal design, which has led to an increase of easy-to-use products in a variety of sectors. Prefectures like Tokyo have been crafting their own ordinances to make lodging and public facilities barrier free, going above and beyond national laws in preparation for the 2020 Olympics and Paralympics..



Universal design in public facilities (Photo courtesy of INAX)

Welfare for People with Economic Difficulties

Daily-life welfare support for people with economic difficulties is provided on the basis of the Public Assistance Law (Seikatsu Hogo Ho), enacted in 1950. The fundamental principle of this law is to guarantee a minimum livelihood for people who are living in poverty because of circumstances beyond their control, with the aim of helping them achieve self-reliance.

This support is initiated on the basis of applications made by the person who needs the assistance or by that person's legal guardian or a relative living at the same address. In principle, the assistance is provided to the household unit.

This daily-life support is administered by welfare offices, under the responsibility of certified social workers. As in the case of welfare activities involving children and handicapped and aged persons, they are assisted in their work by commissioned welfare volunteers appointed by local governments. Prefectures like Tokyo have been crafting their own ordinances to make lodging and public facilities barrier free, going above and beyond national laws in preparation for the 2020 Olympics and Paralympics.

The types of support fall into eight categories as follows: (1) assistance for food, clothing, and other items needed to meet daily-life requirements; (2) assistance for education, including the costs incurred for compulsory education (textbooks, school meals, class fees, etc.); (3) assistance for housing; (4) assistance for medical examinations and medicine; (5) assistance for childbirth; (6) assistance with funds and equipment needed for work purposes; (7) assistance for funeral expenses; and (8) assistance for long-term care.