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Age-Friendly Akita City in Action

By Stephanie K. Firestone

AGE-FRIENDLY AKITA CITY IN ACTION

A weekly delivery is usually the only outside contact for 85-year-old Keiko Komatsu, so she's excited when Shiho Funaga brings her milk and asks about her health. What Komatsu may not realize is that Funaga's gentle inquiry is all part of her company's contributions to a city that clamors to become an international model for age-friendliness.

OPPOSITE PAGE

Shiho Funaga delivers milk to the home of Keiko Komatsu, 85. Funaga's delivery route takes her to 40 houses before noon. The two women discuss Komatsu's state of mind and general aches and pains.

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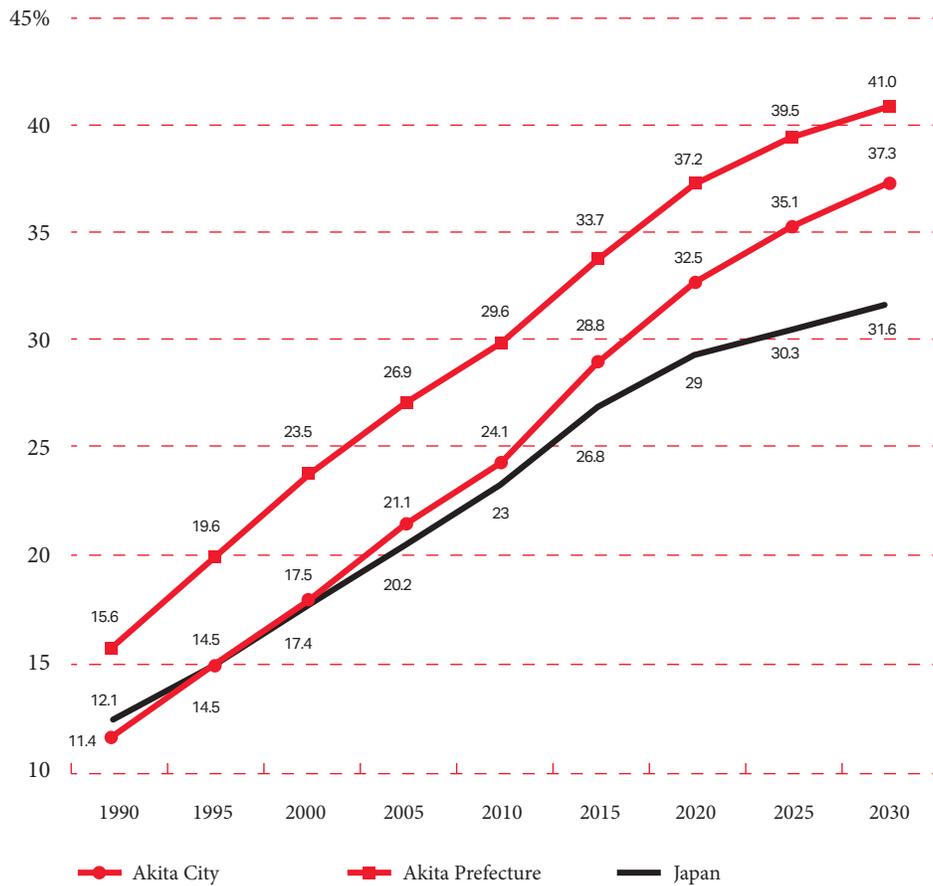
Funaga works for Minamiyama Daily Service Company, which has joined Akita City's Age-Friendly Partner Program for private companies that support the elderly. Some partner firms actually employ aging Japanese; others such as Minamiyama add additional purpose to their work. The result is that Komatsu knows her milkwoman will call for help if needed, and Funaga finds more meaning in her job.

In 2011, Akita City became the first in Japan to join the WHO's Global Network of Age-friendly Cities and Communities. Mayor Motomu Hozumi, together with his brother Hisashi Hozumi, the president of Friends of the International Federation on Ageing (FOIFA) Japan, set out to shift older citizens from dependency to contribution — to lead active lives even after they are old enough to need help themselves. “We would like to take initiatives and launch policies that would support a bright outlook for our future, instead of believing that this is something entirely negative,” said Mayor Hozumi. “Because we now live a longer life, we would like to make Akita City an example of what is possible for the rest of the world.”

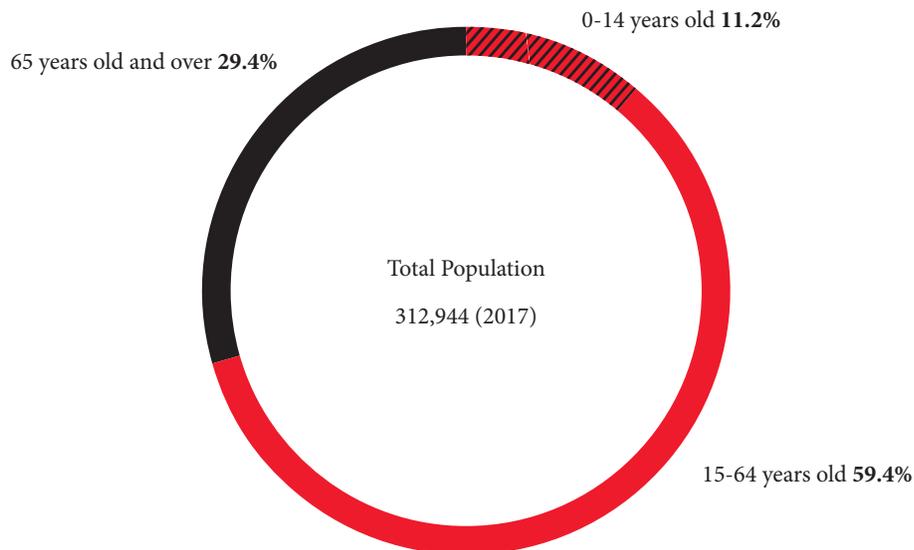
At a City Hall exhibition for senior citizens' groups to showcase talents and crafts, a bonsai club displays carefully-tended works of art. A sales associate for Minamiyama Daily Service Company.



Akita City Changes in Aging Rate



Age Distribution



AKITA CITY



SEAL



REGION

Tohoku

POPULATION

Total: 312,944 (2017)

Men: 147,436

Women: 165,508

TOTAL AREA

906.09 sq km (349.84 sq mi)

CLIMATE (YEARLY AVERAGE)

Sunshine hours: 1,526

Snowy days: 98.8

Snowfall cm/in: 377 (148.4)

Precipitation days (≥ 0.5 mm): 195.6

AVERAGE INCOME (INDIVIDUAL)

City: JPY 2,912,000

Prefecture: JPY 2,467,000

2014 DATA

INDUSTRIES

PRIMARY

Agriculture, forestry, fisheries

SECONDARY

Mining, manufacturing, construction

TERTIARY

Electricity, gas and water, wholesale and retail, finance and insurance, real estate, transportation, telecommunications, service

GROSS CITY PRODUCT BY INDUSTRY (MILLIONS, JAPANESE YEN) 2014 DATA

Primary: 5,886 / 0.5%

Secondary: 167,555 / 13.1%

Tertiary: 1,101,461 / 86.4%

AGE GROUP

0 to 14: 34,352

15 to 64: 182,728

65 or older: 90,610

No record: 5,978

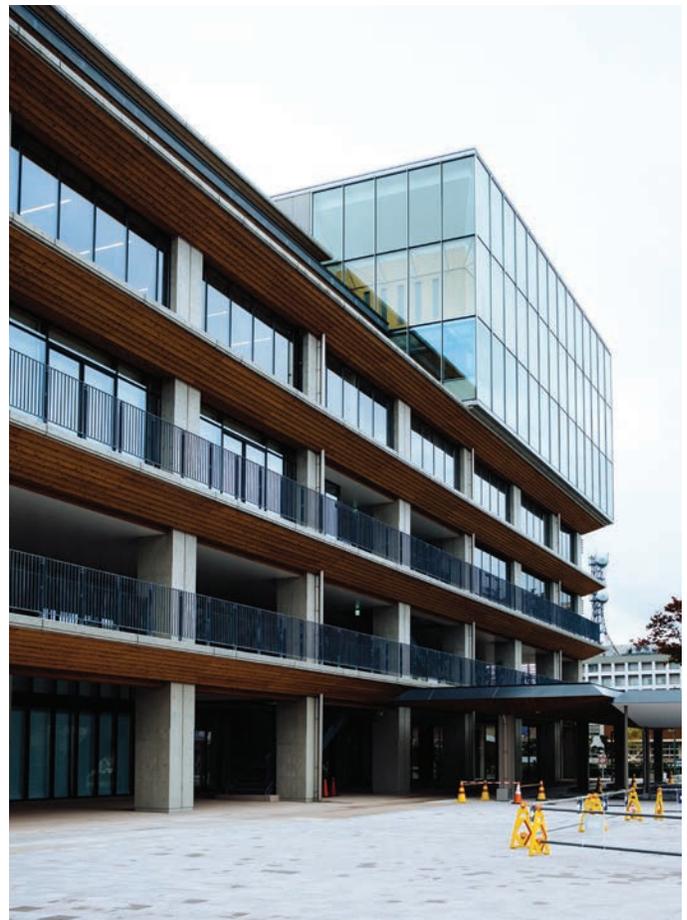
Akita City's Age-Friendly City Plan features action by both government and citizens themselves. The "active aging" citizen plan promotes age-friendliness at stores and other facilities, in part to fight isolation of the elderly, and offers public awareness campaigns to dispel the negative image of aging. Even the process of creating a symbol for Age-Friendly Akita City included submissions from residents as old as 80 and as young as 13.

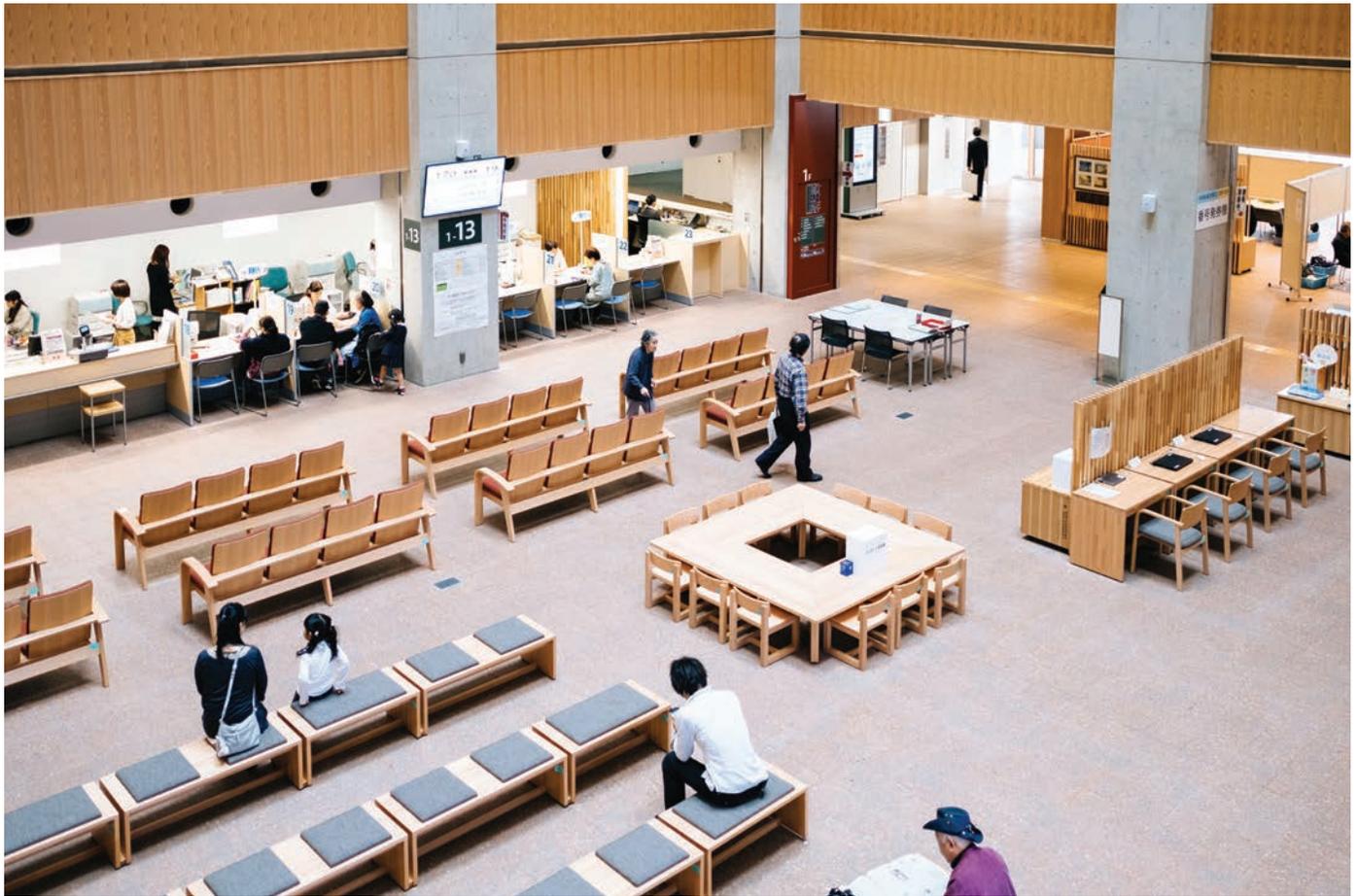
Akita City's efforts are based on unquestionable trends: Nearly 30 percent of its 320,000 residents are 65 or older, with the surrounding Akita Prefecture even higher. Younger adults often can't find work in the isolated rural prefecture, so they migrate to larger cities and spur even higher rates of aging. But Akita City faces this trend with an ambitious commitment. The city's new multi-generational city hall opened in 2016 with a goal to support all citizens, including the elderly: Hearing assistance devices are available at the front desk; signs are easy to read, and routes are clearly marked; a map shows every restroom in the building; handicapped parking and the ramp from the bus stop are both covered; wheelchairs and carts are available to borrow, and wheelchair paths are heated to avoid slippery snow or ice. Citywide, more than 60 roads are heated to melt snow.

Aside from these physical improvements, most of Akita City's age-friendly work is guided by what it calls a "soft" approach, based on community-building and strengthening the social fabric of the city. One member of the city's four-person Age-Friendly division indicated that while most work in the municipality is bound by laws and regulations, the staff enjoys freedom in the difficult task of finding a "correct" solution to age-friendly challenges. Emiko Saito, the director of the group, said the job changed her outlook: "If we do not start thinking about creating a community for our second life," she said, "I believe that we may end up isolated and lonely after retirement. So what I am thinking about the most these days is to figure out a way to create a bridge between the former and the latter."

Unlike physical change in buildings or roads, which take time to conceive, plan and execute, some social efforts can create quick results. One example is the popular one-coin bus service, which is designed to encourage older adults to be socially active

Scenes from the newly-constructed City Hall. The building was designed for accessibility and inclusion, with no detail overlooked—from concierge-type service at the front desk, to inset cane holders in chairs.





“Right now, the younger generation and birth rate is declining... In our role as the government, we would like to take initiatives and launch policies that would support a bright outlook for our future, instead of believing that this is something entirely negative. We would like to make Akita an example of what is possible for the rest of the world.”

— Mayor Motomu Hozumi

PHOTOS

Mayor Motomu Hozumi of Akita City discusses the city's age-friendly commitment.

OPPOSITE PAGE

The offices at City Hall, which employs 2,547 people; the situation room, where the mayor can monitor natural disasters; the Age-Friendly City team, Yoko Kodama, Emiko Saito, Naoki Kaga, and Ken Sasaki; covered walkways and ramps to the bus stop outside City Hall; and employees in the building's child care room.



by charging a single fee for rides on fixed-route buses. The project started in 2001 by targeting people 70 and older. When the qualifying age was cut to 68, the number of users increased by 11.4 percent, and the program lowered the age again to 65 in October 2017 hoping for greater expansion. The one-coin program purposely interfaces with the Age-Friendly Partner Program — discounts and free drinks are offered by stores and bathhouses to anyone showing a one-coin certificate.

Akita City has other plans, including a “second life” guidebook for older entrepreneurs who start a business in a new field or otherwise cultivate their life after retirement. Another project called “Living Lab” will help design products and services that reflect the need of the aging population. Meanwhile, Mayor Hozumi hopes future technological innovations will help people continue to age well in his city. In ten years, he predicted, artificial intelligence could replace half of future jobs. “In spite of that,” he said, “many

seniors possess certain skills that might allow them to be able to live and work for a very long time, without retiring.”

That sentiment was echoed by Akita resident Shigeru Takahashi, who proclaimed: “I think I’m too young to imagine my old days.” Takahashi is 64 years old. ♦



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CONTACT
AARP International
601 E Street, NW
Washington, DC 20049
United States
T +1 202 434 2398
E international@aarp.org

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