

# Nonprofit movement shakes up Japan

By Dave Bockmann, Department of Neighborhoods

Over the past couple of years, I've traveled to Japan several times. My trips were sponsored by the Mie Prefectural government and the Japan Foundation's Center for Global Partnership. The purpose was to share information about Seattle's Neighborhood Matching Fund program and to learn about Japan's volunteer-led, community-based organizations.

One can't talk about volunteerism in Japan without reference to the 1995 earthquake that devastated Kobe. Over 6,300 people died, 40,000 people were injured, and 300,000 people were left homeless in that awful disaster.

Frozen with bureaucratic indecision, government agencies were slow to respond. In their stead, hundreds of thousands of volunteers, organized in informal organizations and *chonaikai* (neighborhood associations), immediately rushed to the most devastated parts of the city. Volunteers rescued those trapped under fallen debris, provided medical care, helped in evacuation shelters, distributed relief goods, cooked emergency foods, checked buildings for safety, cleaned debris, and provided psychological support to survivors.

Until the great Kobe earthquake, there was a general belief that volunteerism and the nonprofit sector were western ideas that wouldn't work in Japan. A basic tenet, one encouraged by government bureaucrats, was that "the government takes care of everything so that the people don't need to." No longer.

Within weeks of the earthquake, the national Diet (parliament) began discussing legislation that would produce the 1998 Nonprofit Organization Law. Until then there was no legal framework for small civic groups to incorporate, and traditional Japanese nonprofits were more like semi-governmental organizations than an independent sector. The NPO law for the first time permitted prefectural governments to grant nonprofit status to voluntary community-based organizations.

Some prefectural governments have gone beyond just recognizing nonprofits and have established NPO support centers. The Mie Prefectural government is one. Mie Prefecture, located several hun-

dred kilometers south of Tokyo, is similar to King County in size and population. In 1995, Mie elected a progressive governor, Masayasu Kitagawa, who was determined to shake up the bureaucracy. Hiromi Morinishi, who has been my Mie guide, was appointed by the governor to head up the new Department of Nonprofit Assistance in 1997.

Mr. Morinishi admits now that when appointed he had little knowledge of NPOs. "We were the first to start such a Department in Japan and I had no model to follow," he says. "So I decided to do research. I traveled intensively throughout the prefecture, meeting staff and volunteers of nonprofit organizations and volunteers. This opened my eyes and changed my views from that of a bureaucrat to that of a citizen."

Under Morinishi's guidance, the prefecture opened a Nonprofit Assistance Center in a convenient location adjacent to the railway station. The Center is governed by a citizen board representing dozens of community-based organizations formed over the past several years. The center is open weekdays from 9:00 a.m. to 10:00 p.m. and on weekends. The center has public access computer terminals, copy and fax machines, information journals, and free meeting space. During each of my visits, the Center has been bubbling with activity and discussion.

The nonprofits that I've visited in Mie include environmental activists, associations for people with disabilities, open space advocates, elder caregiving groups, and consumer cooperatives. With help from the Mie Prefectural Nonprofit Assistance Center, the leaders of the citizen groups are beginning to share information and develop leadership skills. Where once government was entirely top-down, citizen leaders are now demanding to be heard and consulted *before* government decisions are made.

It might be said, the Kobe earthquake shook up more than the just the countryside.

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