

VOLUNTEERS PITCH IN

As need grows, food banks extend their reach

By MIKA OMURA

The Asahi Shimbun

With a growing number of Japanese struggling to make ends meet, food charities play an important role providing needy people with one of life's necessities.

The so-called food bank movement—in which charity groups distribute donated food products that are perfectly edible but cannot be put on retail shelves due to inadequate packaging or other defects—is widespread in the United States.

Similar efforts in Japan, however, have mostly centered on Tokyo and the Kansai region.

Now, established and newly emerging Japanese hunger-relief organizations are extending their reach to regional areas.

One of the new regional food banks is Aiainet, a nonprofit organization in Hiroshima that began a full-scale operation of food pickup and hauling in May.

The group, set up in February, relies on businesses that donate leftover vegetables, as well as udon and soba noodles that can't be sold because of labeling errors.

Aiainet supplies group homes for people with physical disabilities and support groups assisting people on low incomes.

Yoshiko Harada, the executive director of Aiainet, works as a registered dietician at a local hospital. She became interested in food charities after observing a growing number of elderly patients who were unable to feed themselves adequately.

Harada recalled once suggesting to an elderly couple, who apparently had difficulty doing their own cooking, that they should take advantage of home-delivered meals.

The husband rebuffed her proposal, citing financial problems.

"Food is a necessity in life," Harada said. "I wanted to provide a sense of security by making food available (to those who desperately need it)."

About 20 people, including those working at medical institutions and social welfare facilities, are lending a hand to Aiainet.

As one of its goals, the group aims to offer home-delivery of meals, made from donated food, to senior citizens.

In Tomigusuku city in Okinawa Prefecture, Satoko Okuhira began a one-woman mission to set up Food Bank Okinawa, handing out fliers seeking food donations at a flea market last fall.



Left: Satoko Okuhira, far right, poses with a box of donated food her Food Bank Okinawa will deliver to a facility for families with sick children in Haeburu, Okinawa Prefecture; above: Bags of cut vegetables are stored in a fridge at Aiainet, a Hiroshima food bank.

Okuhira, a 34-year-old homemaker, today is joined by 18 others, including working wives and students, who collect and deliver food for the group, as well as help to raise its public profile.

It has so far supplied 13 facilities in the prefecture with about 2.2 tons of food, including rice, canned goods and vegetables.

The recipients include a shelter for single mothers and children.

"I am still feeling my way around, but (food charities) have spread more quickly than I had expected over a short period of time," Okuhira said.

A 45-year-old recipient who stays in the Life Support Institution for Fatherless-Families in Naha expressed her appreciation.

"Donated food is a big help when I am struggling to make ends meet," the woman said. "Apart from

that, I am really touched by their action because I feel as if their compassion to help us out and sincerity were expressed in the form of food."

One of the other receiving facilities is Family House *Caajumaru no Ie* in Haeburu, a lodging facility for families from remote islands and far-away places whose children are being treated at a hospital on Okinawa's main island.

Noriyo Minami, a 39-year-old homemaker from nearby Yoronjima island who stayed at the facility in July and August, said the provisions helped her when her family was weighed down with health-care expenses for her son.

Donors on the rise

Food Bank Okinawa accepts unopened food that can be stored at room temperature and whose expiry date is more than two weeks ahead.

While it has a few corporate donors, the number of individual donors giving away rice, canned food and confectionery is rising.

"I want to step up PR ef-

orts to gain understanding of companies," Okuhira said.

The food bank, she added, needs to address such challenges as how to recruit more volunteers who can work on weekdays, as well as securing a warehouse for stockpiles.

According to estimates by the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, 5 million to 9 million tons of food resources annually, or 5 percent to 10 percent of the total, are disposed of while still edible.

Of this, 3 million to 5 million tons come from food manufacturers and retailers, as well as operators of restaurants. These products are thrown out because they are substandard, unsold, returned or left over. The rest is dumped by households.

Second Harvest Japan (2HJ), the country's first food bank, founded in 2002, is recruiting more volunteers in regional areas.

"We want to strengthen our network by enlisting more volunteers in many parts of the country," said Yusuke Wada, 31, 2HJ's re-

source coordinator.

The nonprofit organization held briefing sessions in Sapporo, Nagoya, Osaka, Fukuoka and five other locations in July and August for that purpose.

2HJ has supplied homes and shelters in the Tokyo metropolitan area and elsewhere with about 350 tons of food annually.

It plans to gather information on local homes and shelters that could benefit from food donations. 2HJ is also considering training would-be volunteers for the project.

In Nagoya, about 20 volunteers are laying the groundwork to establish Second Harvest Nagoya.

In the United States, where food banks began in the 1960s, there are 200 such organizations.

For those interested in learning more about food banks and their challenges, a book "Food Bank toiu Chosen" (A food bank's mission) written by Etsuko Ohara, a freelance journalist, was published in July by Iwanami Shoten Publishers.