

The Volunteers Who Encouraged the Community



▲ After 9:00 a.m. on September 28, 2011. A large number of volunteers assembled in front of the Disaster Volunteer Center.

Photo courtesy of Minamisanriku Social Welfare Council

On March 26, 2011, the Minamisanriku Social Welfare Council, with the support of the Yamagata Prefecture Social Welfare Council and the Sakai Social Welfare Council in Osaka Prefecture, set up a Disaster Volunteer Center on the grounds of Bayside Arena.

Individual volunteers from all over Japan formed a line in front of the center every morning together with corporate volunteers wearing bibs with their company names, and volunteers from NPOs and NGOs. By March 2016, the center had accepted a total of 151,000 volunteers. There were also volunteers who did not register with the center but took part in the volunteer activities directly. When such volunteers are included in the calculations, the number of people who engaged in some kind of support activity in Minamisanriku rises to over 200,000. Even now, more than 10 years since the earthquake, many groups and individuals are still engaged in support activities.

After affected residents were settled in temporary housing, volunteer activity shifted to industrial support work. This started with the removal of debris from beaches and fields, upgrades of fishing equipment, and the restoration of fishing ports. Minamisanriku was assisted with a wide variety of work, including sowing seeds, weeding, and harvesting at farms, and the harvesting of wakame seaweed in the fisheries industry. Noting the way in which volunteers were impressed by the taste of freshly harvested wakame seaweed, people working in Minamisanriku's fishery industry came to view the value of their occupations in a new light. The presence of volunteers played a powerful role in our recovery. We were in the depths of despair, and it was none other than the many volunteers who continued to travel back and forth between Minamisanriku who helped us discover pride in our hometown. Time and time again, they gave us the strength to lift ourselves up and not fall into resignation.