

Local Survivors Who Sustained the Community as Community Support Workers

Community support workers in the Minamisanriku model



▲ Community supporter workers at a temporary housing facility (October 11, 2011)

Photo courtesy of The Minamisanriku Town Council of Social Welfare

Minamisanriku's district assembly halls function as bases for community activity. Of the 55 halls that were standing at the time of the disaster, the tsunami washed away 38. Temporary housing facilities used after the disaster were organized into 58 locations.

The Minamisanriku Town Council of Social Welfare sought to provide people affected by the disaster employment opportunities through the use of emergency job creation regulations. In the summer of 2011, the council assigned 100 temporary workers (community support workers) to assist survivors. Those employed were Minamisanriku residents with no previous experience working in the welfare field. Under this method that was employed in Minamisanriku, community supporters who were themselves survivors offered support to fellow-survivors in a combination of two ways: (1) live-in support, where community support workers resided in the same temporary housing village as the households they were supporting, and (2) visits from community support workers residing elsewhere.

During the training sessions, support workers learned that they should prepare themselves for the pain and stress involved in being receptive to the irritations and anxieties that survivors would be feeling and to provide support for their day-to-day needs with this in mind. Instead of taking a formulaic approach, community supporters worked from the survivor's perspectives to make the most of possibilities that were available. They worked hand-in-hand with survivors to realize ideas that had been proposed by both parties. This approach was carried out consistently. Community supporters made door-to-door rounds of evacuation centers and temporary housing facilities, handing out essential supplies, such as water. This enabled them to form a picture of the living conditions in such places and offer support by holding informal gatherings and keeping an eye on the residents. These efforts strengthened the will to live among survivors and helped build a relationship of trust between the support workers and the townspeople.

The result of such a method of community support, in which residents were the central players and joys were shared between both parties, was that the diverse needs of each individual resident were met.

Over the course of six years and nine months, from the summer of 2011 until March 2018, community support workers made 1,012,398 household visits. Approximately 560,000 of them were made by live-in community supporters who were Minamisanriku citizens aged 60 or over and themselves living in temporary housing facilities.