

How did we survive the earthquake, tsunami and nuclear accident?

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Listen to the voice of the people in Fukushima Prefecture! (from the "Daily Newspaper" in the Hisanohama area along Route 6)



IWAKI National Hospital by the sea (at the back of the photo). Successful evacuation saved the patients.

Ghost Town Iwaki

The greatest earthquake and tsunami of the millennium cost many lives this time. Even now, hundreds of thousands of people have been forced to live an inconvenient life as refugees.

Iwaki City, our hometown, has a beautiful coastline called "Iwaki's Seven Beaches" and has been famous for bonito, saury, sea urchin fishing, and surfing.

The huge tsunami hit this coastal region, wiping out the peaceful towns along the coastline, killing about 300 residents.

A man with muscular dystrophy, one of our users, was also killed by the tsunami. Some of our home-helpers lost their families, while there were one user and one helper whose houses were destroyed.

The earthquake and tsunami inflicted tremendous damage on us. In addition to this, however, the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant accident gave us another horrible damage.

There were a series of hydrogen explosions first at Reactor 1 on March 12, next at Reactor 3 on the 14th and then at Reactor 4 on the 15th. These explosions have blown off the reactor buildings whose awfully bent steel frames gave the biggest shock ever to those who saw them. (continues to the next page)



"Alive" turned into a makeshift evacuation center
It became a temporary evacuation center for those who were not able to go home due to the earthquake for a week.



Feeding gasoline which was sent from outside of the city (March 18)
It was gasoline that was in the hardest shortage among others.



Transporting relief goods from Tokyo to Iwaki (including gasoline and heating oil)
The photo shows liquid diet and other goods have been delivered to the Iwaki City health center.

News of the spread of a large amount of radiation in the air threw the people into a panic, who had believed the propaganda by the government and the electric power companies, which had kept telling that nuclear power plants were absolutely safe because of their multiple protections.

Iwaki City is adjacent to Futaba-County in which the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant is located. It is about 30 kilometers from the city's border to the nuclear power plant.

Right after the hydrogen explosions, the distribution of goods was completely cut off by the rumors, which said "Iwaki City is dangerous because the people and the areas are all contaminated by the radiation" (harmful rumors). Specifically, supermarkets and convenience stores shut the doors with no goods left for sale. Gas stations were also closed indefinitely with no gasoline brought in. Moreover, even clinics and pharmacies were trying to shut down one after another. Such an unusual situation was going on at that time.

Five days after the earthquake, few cars were running on the roads besides vehicles of the Self-Defense Forces and patrol cars. Shopping areas also turned the lights off.

A large number of Iwaki citizens evacuated incessantly. It seems that most of its population of 340,000 fled out of the city.

The city was surrounded by utter silence and turned into a ghost town.

Lives of persons with severe disabilities put in danger

This kind of situation put in danger the lives of persons with severe disabilities including muscular dystrophy and ALS, who need daily medical assistance and care.

I was consulted by a person with cervical cord injury who said, “The home-visit nursing station told me it could not send its helpers from tomorrow with no more gasoline left. What am I supposed to do?” I was lost for words to know such a thing could happen. Furthermore, an office director with whom we had provided helper-dispatch service to ALS patients came and apologized to me with tears in his eyes, saying “My family told that they wanted me to evacuate with them. I can’t send helpers from tomorrow. I’m so sorry.”

A series of extreme events swept out of the city different types of services including medical care, home-visit nursing and home-visit care. Things were getting worse day by day, and there was no sign of improvement.

Administrative services were also messed up. This situation happened not only in Fukushima. Other disaster areas like Iwate and Miyagi suffered from a similar situation as well.

For this hardest week, I stayed at the office with users of assisted living service (day service for persons with disabilities) and several helpers, who became unable to go home, while collecting information, food and drinking water, as well as cheering up our staff, saying “Let’s keep staying here and providing home-visit care.”

Some argued that the level of radiation dose in Iwaki City was not so dangerous to need an immediate evacuation to prevent damage to the human body, except for pregnant women and infants.

However, if we had done nothing about it, we would have faced awful consequences. I thought the time was coming.



Temporary evacuation to Tokyo (March 19)
It became difficult to live a normal daily life, because no recovery was expected in critical infrastructure, and the distribution of goods was cut off. Thus, we have decided to temporarily evacuate to Tokyo. 30 or so people wanted to evacuate. The photo shows the car was about to leave for Tokyo. We used seven cars to evacuate the people.



After five hours of travel, we arrived at Toyama Sunrise in Shinjuku Ward, Tokyo.



We received a warm welcome from staff at the Relief Headquarters for Persons with Disabilities Affected by the Great East Japan Earthquake.

Mass evacuation and the “Village of Independence”

Early in the morning of March 16, I concluded that there was no other option left but a mass evacuation for persons with severe disabilities and persons with visual impairment and no partners to live together, both of whom were unable to evacuate in their own right. In order to evacuate them, I made all-out efforts to solve two problems; securing necessary shelters and procuring gasoline.

Fortunately, as power had come back on, I was able to access to the Internet. I asked for help to solve these two problems, using the mailing list of JIL (Japan Council on Center for Independent Living), which our organization has joined as a member.

Three hours later, I received an uplifting response from JIL. JIL said that it could secure fifty beds at Toyama Sunrise (National Welfare Center for Persons with Disabilities) in Shinjuku Ward, Tokyo.

Each of its member centers rushed to home improvement centers to secure 20-liter portable cans of gasoline. On the 17th, the following day, the staff from one of the branch of Center for Independent Living came all the way from Hiroshima Prefecture to bring us 200 liters of gasoline, traveling by land for a day and a night. On the 18th, 300 liters of gasoline arrived from Shizuoka. On the 19th, 10 liters of gasoline was refueled to each of the cars of helpers, who bravely kept staying in Iwaki and providing home-visit care, while 30 liters of gasoline was refueled to each of the seven cars used for a mass

evacuation to Tokyo.

It was the moment when the Center for Independent Living completely revealed their strong network, powerful energy and steadfast solidarity.

34 persons (8 users, 10 helpers, 3 HQ staff and 13 family members) arrived at Toyama Sunrise without any trouble during five hours of travel on March 19. We received a warm welcome from staff of the Relief Headquarters for Persons with Disabilities Affected by the Great East Japan Earthquake organized by JIL, etc. and board members of the Japan ALS Association, who happened to hold a meeting there.

This scene was broadcast on NHK's educational program "Welfare Network" at 8:00 pm on March 21.

After that, we carried relief goods including gasoline and liquid diet every three days, while replacing our helpers. We also kept supporting home-visit care for ALS patients by delivering gasoline to our associated helper stations in Iwaki and Koriyama and Helper Station Komorebi, which our organization has run in Fukushima City.

We took refuge at Toyama Sunrise for a month. I delivered relief goods including gasoline and Ensure(Liquid diet) to Iwaki every three days, gave instructions necessary for activities in Iwaki, and then returned to Tokyo two or three days later. I repeated this kind of life style until the situation improved.

Toyama Sunrise was perfect as a shelter where persons with severe disabilities took refuge. It offered not only a barrier-free building but also cordial services by its workers, who were accustomed to taking care of persons with disabilities.

Above all, it was easier there that persons with severe disabilities, who need medical care assistance, went to see a doctor (including one patient on dialysis), and asked for doctors' visit and home-visit nursing. The relief headquarters deployed staff who could work around the clock at the site. Our coordinators had a series of discussions day after day with those staff, who took immediate action to respond to these needs for us.



The group of evacuees was named the “Village of Independence.” The “Meeting of the Village of Independence” was convened several times to discuss when to return to Iwaki and other subjects.

Moreover, the relief headquarters held a number of refreshing events for us, such as a short trip to Senso-ji Temple, a joint cherry blossom viewing party with the Center for Independent Living in Tokyo and a movie watching gathering.

A group of about 30 persons was the appropriate number of people, which consequently made it possible to know and pay attention to each person’s health condition.

My accommodation was also used as both a meeting room and a counseling room to talk with helpers without worrying about time. We named our group of evacuees the “Village of Independence.” I became the mayor of the village, and Mr. Ono, a young staff member of persons with disabilities, became the deputy mayor. The “Meeting of the Village of Independence” was convened many times to discuss when to return to Iwaki and other subjects.

We put the meaning of “not relying on the government and the bureaucracy” into the naming of the “Village of Independence.” It is dangerous to have a feeling of “expecting the government to do something” and “waiting for the city’s instructions” under the state of emergency of the natural disaster and nuclear accident. I am not trying to say that public servants are unmotivated. It is just physically impossible. It seems that “giving up” is originally a Buddhist term, which means “clarifying and identifying what is the problem.” I think it is important to “give up” in its original meaning.

There are different types of help, such as self-help, mutual help and public help. Probably, now is the time to put “mutual help” into force. Since we had arrived in Tokyo, I was often asked about a mass evacuation of our “Village of Independence” by those who were surprised at what we had done. They asked me, “Has your home-visit care organization gone that far?” Such a question really surprised me.

We have simply done what to do, but it seems to be incredible to them.

What the difference between them and us? Do Tohoku’s regional characteristics deeply rooted in agricultural culture (or village-like human relations) and urban human relations have a significant impact on the difference?

However, one thing is for sure. It is the “Village of Independence” that would survive in a time of a catastrophic disaster.

Our fight, living under these circumstances

Some seismologists said that Japan had entered a period of brisk seismic activity. In fact, on April 11 and 12, Iwaki City was hit by inland earthquakes on the Japanese seismic scale of lower 6. Many of the citizens said that those earthquakes were bigger than the one on March 11. Even after them, aftershocks have followed almost every day.

Furthermore, the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant accident has been in an extremely severe and unpredictable situation. I freeze at the mere thought of another huge earthquake and tsunami.

Some of the employees of TEPCO and the government have made excuses about this nuclear accident, saying that the earthquake and the tsunami were far bigger than expected. Their behavior is quite deplorable as the one made by those who get involved in life-threatening business.

The important facilities to cool the reactors have been built on the coastline. Questions have been raised over their vulnerability even before the Diet. Probably, the truth is that the earthquake and the tsunami were the scale “they did not want to expect” rather than the one “beyond their expectation.”

Our organization has been making the following efforts, “expecting” that another critical accident might occur at the nuclear power plant.

Internal newsletter for employees “Enjoint” Excerpts from the 5/6 issue

Our future efforts

①Creating a handbook “Protection against radiation”

You have to have correct knowledge about radiation. When the government reports that a radiation dose is not at the level which could have immediate impact on health, it can be translated that a radiation dose is at the level which could have long-term impact on health.



Copies of this completed version of the handbook have been given out.
(Utsukushima Fund-subsidized project)
The same version published on our website.

We cannot expect information that we really want from the government, the electric power companies (and their entourage researchers), which want to underestimate the danger of nuclear accidents, and TV stations, which receive advertisement fees of several hundred million yen a year.

In radiation, there is no borderline under which your safety is absolutely assured. Therefore, it seems that you should estimate far more severe figures.

I have decided to create this handbook, because with a flood of information circulated, I think it is

crucial to provide information to protect your health and a standard figure which tells you when to take necessary actions like an evacuation. We have issued the 2,000 copies. We are also going to create its Braille version and audiotape for persons with visual impairment at the same time, aiming at their publication in May.

②Having an evacuation drill for a nuclear accident on May 11

An evacuation drill is scheduled to be held for users and staff of outpatient service on May 11, two months after the earthquake.

We will have a second drill for a wider range of people including users of home-visit care service in the future.

③Coming up with a mass evacuation plan

We must brace for another huge earthquake and tsunami like 3.11, which would inflict catastrophic fatal injuries to the shattered Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant, and cause widespread radiation exposure into the atmosphere. We are going to come up

with an evacuation plan immediately against such a severe accident. In such a situation, “expecting the government to do something” or “expecting instructions from Iwaki City” is too optimistic. Residents in litate-mura had been exposed to radiation for fifty days after the nuclear accident, without getting any appropriate instructions. It is extremely important to have a consciousness of “protecting your life for yourself.”

Lastly, I would like to describe “what is necessary” in preparation for an enormous earthquake disaster, in the light of my experience this time.

①Measures against long-term power and water failures

Generator, batteries (at least two batteries required), charger which is able to charge from a cigarette lighter port in a car—Securing power with different systems.

Stockpiling mineral water, keeping a bath tub filled with water all the time, and filling pans with water as much as possible.

②Measures against long-term lack of daily goods

Stockpiling non-perishable foods, and saving enough Ensure, sanitary goods, etc. for a month.

③Keeping your car filled up with gasoline all the time.

④Changing your cell phone into the one with easier connection. Our organization has changed our cell phones for business use into iPhones.

⑤Keeping motorcycles or power-assisted bicycles ready for use in preparation for sagging roads.

⑥Being ready for leaving anytime, keeping your backpack filled with what to bring with you in an emergency.



We presented a bouquet of flowers and expressed our gratitude to those who we had owed so much at the relief headquarters, the Sakura-kai and Toyama Sunrise. Then, we headed back to Iwaki. It was our first return home in a month.

People say “Once on shore, pray no more.” However, let us survive radiated Japan with courage, keeping in mind “Be prepared and have no regrets,” so that we can prevent a situation of “Once on shore, pray no more.”