

Justice Minister's Award

Evacuation of People with Mental Disabilities during Disasters

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My younger brother was born with autism as a mental disability. Since he is unable to speak very well, I sometimes cannot understand what he says, and in such cases I have him explain what he wants to say by writing or drawing, the latter of which he is good at. Because I have lived with him since he was born, I seldom become confused, even if he gets into a mentally unstable condition in his everyday life at home. I think that my younger brother is very honest. But I have to care a little more about him when we go out, because he sometimes utters inarticulate sounds and makes other people turn toward him. When we are walking, I always hold his hand firmly to prevent him from suddenly breaking into a run. Since he often tries to touch various things, I keep an eye on what his other hand is doing while we are walking. Because of this, my family and I do not like going to crowded places very much.

I have recently learned about disaster preparedness at school. For our family, a nearby elementary school is our designated evacuation center. I have become very worried that, in the event of a disaster, my family might have difficulties staying at the evacuation center.

I tried searching the Internet for information about how families with autistic children respond to disasters. When I searched the web by entering the search words “autism,” “disaster” and “evacuation,” I found that the things I was concerned about had really happened.

What I found was “the isolation of families with autistic children”. Such families were unable to go to evacuation centers in the aftermath of the Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake, the Niigata Chuetsu Earthquake, the Great East Japan Earthquake, or the recent Kumamoto Earthquake. Although I had vaguely anticipated this, I was shocked by the overly large number of such cases, and became very sad about it.

In the case of a family with a severely autistic child living near the nuclear power plant in Fukushima Prefecture, although they knew an evacuation center had been opened near their house after the Great East Japan Earthquake, they refrained from going there because they thought their child might be sensitive to the changing environment and crowd and respond with panic. Since relief supplies were delivered only to the evacuation center, which they could not enter, the four family members spent their days trying to feed themselves with the small amount of food that was in their house while

feeling scared that the medicine they relied on for suppressing epileptic seizures might run out. In addition to them, some other families were also unable to go to evacuation centers and stayed in their cars. Some people also faced difficulties because they were unable to leave their disabled children alone to go shopping. It also seems too hard for such people to stand in line for a long time at evacuation centers to get relief supplies.

These families were all unable to go to evacuation centers for the same reason. The major barrier was “the tacit agreement” among people staying at the centers “to stay quiet so people could sleep”. They were unable to enter evacuation centers because they were worried that their children might “bother other people” by getting panicked and making loud noises. I understand such feeling of these families very well. My family may have no choice but to act in the same way. I think, however, that this is a sad thing and a wrong thing.

I know that some people are striving to prepare facilities called “welfare evacuation centers,” following calls from families who have experienced disasters. When I asked my mother, she said that my city was also preparing an evacuation center of that kind. However, according to her, our family has been told to try the ordinary local evacuation center first because the welfare evacuation center can only accommodate a limited number of people. I thought that was strange; a welfare evaluation center is supposed to exist because local evacuation centers are difficult for some people to stay in. The welfare evacuation center is far from our house, and we cannot go there without crossing a broad river. I became worried that our family could be isolated if we could not use a car or the river rose.

Although I looked for information to alleviate my concerns, I became more and more worried. But I considered solutions in my own way, and have reached one: to have a kind of welfare evacuation room prepared in the local evacuation center. We would be able to take shelter in such a room without having to worry. However, I am worried that the lack of space at the local evacuation center may not allow it, because I suppose that even ordinary people will be beset by worries when staying at the evacuation center, and will become less tolerant. I think that it will be hard in such a situation for us to make other people understand that autistic children’s behavior does not come about out of selfishness but is a characteristic of their disability.

I think that it is difficult for me to make other people understand my younger brother after a disaster occurs. Therefore, I have realized that I have to make efforts in my everyday life to make my brother understood better by people in the local community. He is never pitiful, but enjoys living and is able to do many things better than me.

I hope to help many more people around us learn about autism as a disability. I also have learned that our family has to more actively share information about the existence of a child with disabilities with people in the local community. It occurred to me that, if everyone cooperated a little more in devising good methods, people with disabilities could also live without worry in the local community.