



Sankaku Planning Iwate's "Mederu Car" Teams Deliver More than Groceries —Site Visit Report—

Overview

On August 23, 2012, JCIE staff visited with the Miyako City team of Sankaku Planning Iwate's "Mederu Car" Project and spent the day accompanying the group on their delivery rounds and daily activities. The aim was to gain a feel for the program and the impact it has had on the local community (including the team members themselves), as well as to see the social and operational challenges that they have been dealing with in the first year since the program was brought to Miyako. The Mederu Car project currently has four teams operating in the cities of Miyako, Noda, Otsuchi, and Ofunato, and in certain cases (such as in Miyako), the team has expanded coverage to include neighboring townships as well. Each of the four teams uses flyers and word of mouth to extend its services to residents in the temporary housing units that have been built in clusters throughout each city, as well as to those often less visible households assigned to live temporarily out of old, vacated apartments. The total scope of the Sankaku Planning Mederu Car program thus includes more than 8,000 households living out of temporary housing units dispersed throughout these four areas.¹



The Miyako City Mederu Car team's delivery vehicle

The Mederu Car project team in Miyako currently employs five local women, two of whom are themselves direct victims of the tsunami and currently live with their families in temporary housing. The team responds to service requests from Miyako City and the neighboring town of Yamada, and they have cultivated relationships with roughly 35 regular "customers" as well as with many more who call less frequently. The customer base for this service is predominantly elderly victims of the tsunami who have difficulty accessing stores in the center of town from their new temporary housing locations, or mothers who have lost their cars and cannot transport the bulk groceries needed for their families. The program was first started in August 2011, and for the first two months, before they were able to secure a small room as a makeshift office space, the women worked out of their delivery vehicles both for deliveries and administrative tasks.

Whereas the immediate impact of this program is the livelihood support given through the delivery of

¹ Source: www.mlit.go.jp/common/000140307.pdf

grocery supplies, the real focus of service is on the psychological support nurtured through the communication channels that this program creates between the delivery team and tsunami victims. Families and individuals living in temporary housing have started to experience the effects of this long-term restricted and makeshift lifestyle, which takes a toll on both their physical and mental health. Through regular visits, delivery team members can check-in on their regular customers to clock their progress and any health issues that may arise. Regular communication with familiar faces from the community helps to very tangibly combat the isolation and related psychological stress.

Background: Temporary Housing and the Breakdown of Communities

The main challenges to the community that this program seeks to combat are the mental, physical, and societal tolls that tsunami victims experience living in temporary housing for extended periods of time. Temporary housing units cannot be built in low-lying areas by the sea, so they have been built in



Housing units are built in a row over loose gravel, making access difficult: the wheelchair ramp faces the back of the housing lot, making it difficult for the elderly residents to enter their own home.

clusters that are scattered throughout the region's mountainous coastline. Consequently, many temporary housing clusters are in remote and inaccessible parts of town, making it a challenge to reach even the nearest grocery store. Elderly residents whose daily movements have been drastically restricted have started experiencing health complications resulting from insufficient physical activity, and many housing lots have been built on loose gravel, making it difficult for those in wheelchairs, using walking sticks, or with other disabilities to move around without assistance.

Housing units themselves are extremely small and vary in quality and sturdiness depending on who has built them, and residents are assigned more or less at random. Alterations such as installing additional shelving or curtains are not technically allowed, and without familiar household items it is difficult to create a sense of "home" in such a temporary and makeshift space. Although this housing was designed to be a "temporary" solution, it is projected that most will have to remain in these housing units for the next five years at least. Residents are thus grappling with a sense of limbo in their lifestyles, and without a clear path forward it is difficult to maintain the motivation or energy to continue with necessary daily household tasks. After months of living in these conditions, those with trouble adjusting turn to substance abuse as an escape, or start to isolate and seclude themselves, losing their ability and will to communicate with their peers. It is these more deep-seated psychological effects that the program has been combatting by encouraging regular and friendly communication with members of their communities who have been grappling with similar challenges themselves.

These challenges all have a direct impact on the social "health" of the community as well.

Neighborhoods have been broken up as tsunami victims were assigned temporary housing at random, and the difference in the quality and standards of housing, as well as the difference between residents' financial situations and ability to cope, can produce resentments and rivalries between old friends and new neighbors that would not have developed otherwise. Since temporary housing lots are scattered throughout the more remote and mountainous parts of town, it is difficult for people to gather in town centers and maintain their ties with others in the community. All of this adds up to the disintegration of local communities, and the effects are magnified in the kinds of small towns and neighborhoods that make up most of Tohoku's coastline.

Program Structure

The program's Miyako City team began its activities on August 17, 2011, with two staff members working out of their Mederu Car delivery vehicle, and it has since expanded to a staff of five. Both of the initial staff were originally recommended due to their prior work experience in delivery services and door-to-door sales—one as a grocery cooperative delivery person and the other as a “Yakult lady” who visited offices and homes door-to-door to sell Yakult yogurt drinks. Both women were already very comfortable communicating with local residents and acutely attuned to the kinds of details that must be taken into account when approaching a stranger's front door for the first time hoping to create and maintain communication channels. This was very important to the success of the program, since the main focus and utility of this program is not solely the service provided, but the communication that takes place through regular interaction between the delivery women and their customers. While the word *mederu* can mean to cherish or to admire, the character used for the name of the program is a homonym meaning the sprout or shoot of a plant. The idea behind the program that drives and distinguishes it from a simple grocery delivery service is the critical and transformative importance of communication to the lives of both those who utilize the service and the women working to carry it out.



The program's symbol or mascot depicted on their flyers and delivery vans

When somebody new calls into the service for the first time, all five women visit the person's home together to introduce themselves so that the person feels familiar and comfortable with whoever might deliver their groceries in the future. After this initial connection is made, the women work in groups of two or three to respond to the service calls that they receive. It is important that nobody is ever left to make these delivery visits on their own lest they be taken advantage of, and this policy is particularly important to Sankaku Planning, which as a nonprofit also administers a number of female support and empowerment programs.

The team members include one “leader” (Ms. Yokota) who is the main coordinator and contact person



The delivery team (left to right: Yokota, Matsumoto, Oomukai, Ishisone, and Nakajima) poses in front of their vehicle after loading it with groceries.

between Sankaku Planning headquarters and the Miyako City branch; two middle-aged mothers (Ms. Ishisone and Ms. Nakajima) living with their extended families in temporary housing units; and two younger women (Ms. Matsumoto and Ms. Oomukai) in their early 20s who have also been struggling to deal with the adverse impact of the disaster on their lives and their local community. The staff of the Mederu Car programs in other cities

tend to be women of at least middle age whose children have grown up, leaving them with spare time to dedicate to day jobs and programs such as this, and the involvement of local youth as staff is unique to the Miyako Mederu Car project. This is seen as a strength, helping to sustain the program in the long run as well as increasing its impact on the local community.

Shopping requests are tailored and individualized. For example, the team makes sure to ask the caller for the specific type or brand of a product they want to ensure the items are ones with which they are familiar. Through this type of very individualized care and attention, they try in what small way they can to restore a sense of home and stability to the lives of their customers.

This attention to detail is a testament to the professionalism with which this program is administered and run. Each day’s deliveries are logged item by item, and at the end of each day these lists are recorded into a database and sent over to the Sankaku Planning headquarters. Each city team works in close consultation with headquarters when dealing with new customers or special situations to ensure that liabilities are avoided, such as when asked by a disabled or elderly customer to come into their homes to help store the delivered groceries. Working closely like this with each Mederu Car project, the Sankaku Planning headquarters is able to monitor the progress and impact of each project on team members as well as on the local communities, and this close and regular contact helps headquarters to respond quickly and support the teams when any problems arise.



Delivery orders are itemized and receipts are written out to record each transaction after grocery supplies are purchased

Program Goals & Challenges

1) Service Provision

Groceries are purchased and delivered for a nominal fee of ¥100 per delivery (roughly \$1.20), to those

who are not easily able to shop for themselves. In most cases, those who call in are elderly residents and sometimes mothers living in temporary housing without easy access to the grocery stores in town. Temporary housing units have been built on higher land in clusters dotting the mountainous coastline of the region, and as such are often remote and far from the center of town. Needs vary from elderly residents who are unable to drive or travel distances down mountainous roads, to mothers whose cars were swept away by the tsunami. Accordingly, orders placed can be as simple as a favorite snack or necessary dinner ingredient, or as hefty as toiletries or bulk cleaning supplies.

2) Cultivating Relationships through Regular Communication



An elderly resident, Ms. Iioka, tells Mederu Car staff about her daughter as she puts in an order.

In this program, the importance of human interaction is stressed above all else. For the elderly residents of temporary housing units, as well as for the five staff members, this service means not only the delivery of supplies but also an often quite rare chance to talk and socialize. Residents, especially those who live alone, tend to withdraw and stay indoors, and this eventually degenerates into a mindset where victims are hesitant or even hostile toward any unfamiliar human interaction. This is one of the main challenges that the Mederu Car staff must overcome when establishing relations with a new customer, but once this initial difficulty is overcome they

see drastic changes in their attitudes and dispositions.

It is important that the staff have all struggled in some way with the same challenges and it is this, combined with the fact that all women are from the area and thus familiar with the local dialect and culture, that sets this program apart from other volunteer or delivery service programs. Staff members cultivate personal relationships with their customers, and use their delivery visits to check in on the elderly and sick. They often pay visits to their regular customers without receiving a delivery call just for a chance to talk and to reassure them that they have not been forgotten. This also goes both ways, and the staff will sometimes get calls from customers who do not have a delivery request that day, but are just checking in to make sure that these women are holding up as well.

3) Female Support and Empowerment

This program is also meant as a support mechanism to empower the female staff members to help them recover and rebuild their own lives affected by the 3/11 disaster. They are told to think about and more importantly to voice to each other their hopes and dreams in order to encourage them to consider their long-term options and goals. The Sankaku Planning headquarters holds regular meetings for the staff members of each Mederu Car project in the region so that they can gather and share experiences and

hopes for the future. The nonprofit in this way acts as a support base and incubator for any business or entrepreneurial goals they may have but do not act upon for fear that they sound far-fetched or unfeasible.

These meetings, however, often occur on weekends, when most staff members must spend time taking care of their families, meaning they are often unable to attend. In these cases, at least one member from the team will attend and attempt to speak for her peers. Another challenge particularly for staff members who are themselves temporary housing residents, is the difficulty in encouraging them to think of long-term goals when each new day seems like a new and considerable challenge. It is difficult to think about the long term when one's biggest dream at the moment is being able to move out of temporary housing units to resume a more stable lifestyle. This, however, can itself be considered a long-term goal, since the fate of the temporary housing units and their residents is still very unclear.

Results & Benefits

One very tangible result has been that this regular human interaction has restored, both in the project team as well as^o in their customers, the ability to open up and talk to people again and to want to interact with their peers. It has helped to bring many people out of isolation, and when staff member speak with customers and their peers, they have been told that their customers seem more lively and upbeat after a few months with the service.

Benefits and Impact on the Lives of "Customers"

- Mederu Car staff took us to meet some of their regular customers who are neighbors in one of the



A regular customer smiles as Ishisone-san hands her the beverages she had ordered for her family members

temporary housing lots in Miyako. Judging from the way they chatted with each other and with the Mederu Car staff one would assume that they had been friends for decades, or certainly since before the disaster. In fact, the woman they took us to see was one of the first customers to sign up last year, and for the first few visits she was withdrawn and very quiet, hesitant to open up about the health problems she was facing or to ask for the help and supplies that she needed. Her neighbor is an old friend of one of the Mederu Car staff, but after living in cramped conditions with her daily movements fairly restricted, she has started to develop health difficulties and is not as mobile or energetic as she was

before the disaster. During the recent visit, however, both women were extremely bright and upbeat, and spoke about how lucky they were relative to their other neighbors that they had the support of their children as well as a steady income from the pensions that they and their husbands had worked toward throughout their old age until the disaster hit. Though initially this had been a courtesy call and not a delivery, by the end of the visit one woman had put in a simple order for a few household and grocery

items such as soda and ice cream for her daughter for when she returned after a long day of work.

- By encouraging isolated individuals living in temporary housing to socialize, this program helps to recreate a sense of community among residents of temporary housing lots, most of whom have been assigned to live there at random and so are not familiar with or friendly toward their new neighbors.
- The ¥100 service fee as well as the professionalism with which the program is run emphasize that it is a service rather than a volunteer initiative, allowing callers to maintain their dignity when utilizing the service, even if their real reason for calling in orders is to have a chance to talk to someone. This empowers temporary housing residents by helping them to take responsibility over their own daily tasks again, escaping the sense of helplessness and dependency of living solely off of donated supplies and government handouts.

Benefits and Impact on the Lives of Program Staff

• **Ishisone-san & Nakajima-san:** Both Ishisone-san and Nakajima-san are mothers with children in primary to high school who have been struggling with the challenges of raising a family in the cramped conditions of temporary housing units. Both stressed how lucky they were to have been able to move into units next door to their parents and in-laws, and how theirs were some of the better-quality housing units around town. Ishisone-san was kind enough to let JCIE staff take a quick look inside her home to view first-hand the kinds of conditions that they will likely have to live in for at least a few years to come. The front door leads into the kitchen with a small bathroom and shower space to the left, which leads into a small bedroom and living room space beyond that. There was room for a bunk-bed for her sons, but space only for one additional futon so Ishisone-san's husband has been sleeping with his mother in the house next door. To try to create some sense of privacy, they had hung curtains in front of the bathroom and the bunk beds, and her husband had installed shelves in most rooms to increase storage space, but alterations such as these are technically prohibited. This makes it very difficult to feel at home in one's own living space, and such makeshift conditions start to take a toll on one's disposition and motivation to go about necessary daily tasks. Over lunch later in the day, however, Ishisone-san's colleagues mentioned how, after working for the Mederu Car project for a few months, she had regained much of her energy and positive attitude, which has no doubt helped to sustain her family through these difficult times.



Left to right: Nakajima, Ishisone, and Matsumoto in front of Ishisone's temporary housing unit.

• One team member, Matsumoto-san, is a young mother who worked at a factory making caskets directly after the tsunami hit. She had to struggle with trying to fill the sudden influx of orders as well as

the deep mental and spiritual toll that this unfortunate work took on her. Her team members spoke about how introverted she was prior to working on the Mederu Car project, unable to make eye contact when speaking to her peers. She has since opened up and enjoys her work interacting with the local community, showing that the benefits of the communication and human interaction through this project really are a two-way street.