

Northeast Japan: 7 disaster-area municipalities show biggest increase in elderly needing living assistance

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Amongst elderly people from seven towns and villages evacuated due to the Fukushima No. 1 Nuclear Power Plant disaster, an additional 46 percent are certified as needing living assistance than before the disaster, it has been learned from the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare (MHLW).

The data comes from the end of April this year. The jump of 46 percent is much higher than the national average increase of 12 percent over the same period. The figures cover the towns of Futaba, Namie, Okuma, Tomioka, Naraha and the villages of Katsurao and Iitate, which are either entirely or mostly under evacuation order.

Compiled in August, the data shows that the number of people in these towns and villages certified as needing care was 2,872 at the end of January 2011, but was up to 4,186 by the end of April this year.

Adding in the 27 percent from the partially evacuated cities of Minamisoma and Tamura, the town of Kawamata, and the village of Kawamura, the increase is still above the national average. The highest prefectural average increase was Kanagawa Prefecture's 16 percent.

One evacuee, 85-year-old Naomi Hayashi, is now in a group nursing home in Fukushima Prefecture after evacuating from Namie and moving between five other locations. According to her 63-year-old daughter-in-law Sumie, she had never received living assistance care before the disaster. However, in March 2011 just after the disaster, Naomi was unable to recognize her family's car when they stopped in a parking lot during their evacuation.

"I thought it was strange," says Sumie.

Naomi's symptoms worsened over the next half year. She went wandering at evacuation shelters, mistook a bedroom for a bathroom and was diagnosed with dementia. She wasn't well aware that she had been evacuated, and would sometimes ask things like, "Are we going to plant the rice yet?" or "Has the rice harvest ended?" as if her family was still tending its fields.

Long Life, a nursing home in Fukushima, has taken in over 50 disaster evacuees. According to Shigekatsu Mori, 72, an official there, most people certified as needing life assistance care have dementia.

Mori says that put in their new environments, the elderly evacuees "have few relations with their neighbors, become depressed and suffer worse cognitive impairment symptoms."

He says that in addition to cognitive impairment, there are cases where elderly evacuees start to need care after shutting themselves in at temporary housing units and not exercising enough.

Takako Yomogida, chairperson of a Tohoku region nursing home association, says, "The elderly are less able to adjust to new circumstances. For people with light cognitive impairment, a massive change to their environment is very damaging. These cases in Fukushima are severe."

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