



About the secondment system

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1. Introduction

Since its establishment, the Miyagi Disaster Mental Health Care Center (MDMHCC) has dispatched mental health social workers as well as other professionals to disaster-affected cities and towns on a secondment basis. The secondment system that the MDMHCC has adopted is a full-time support system in which staff who receive a secondment order go directly from their homes to the disaster-affected city or town. The secondment system was introduced in response to requests from the seconding cities and towns; as such, it was welcomed and well received by them. However, given that it was different from a normal “secondment,” various difficulties emerged, such as how to conclude contracts with the seconding cities and towns and how to reach a common understanding among the MDMHCC staff. In particular, the burden and stress on the seconded staff were considerable.

2. Purpose and methods

This work looks back on the secondment system adopted by the MDMHCC and discusses the issues, with a view on handing over these practices. The method involves compiling a wide range of documents as materials: materials and minutes of the MDMHCC’s management meetings, minutes of managers’ discussions of the secondment system, minutes of the seconded staff meetings, bulletins, staff appointment orders, labor contracts between the MDMHCC and staff, “agreements on support by mental health professionals” exchanged between the seconding cities and towns, posts by seconded staff, and interviews with managers at the time of establishment of the MDMHCC.

3. Start of the secondment system

Suzuki contributed an article on the establishment of the MDMHCC to Bulletin No. 1⁽¹⁾, and Tenma contributed an article on the background of the adoption of the secondment system to Bulletin No. 4⁽²⁾.

Shirasawa’s article, “About the opening of the Miyagi Disaster Mental Health Care Center,” which was published in *Mental Health Care (Hihyosha)*, was listed as a paper published in other journals in Bulletin No. 1⁽¹⁾. Although there is some overlap, this content is briefly summarized here.

The Great East Japan Earthquake that occurred on March 11, 2011, caused extensive damage along the coastline, including damage caused by the earthquake itself as well as by the massive tsunami. Four days after the disaster, on March 15, mental health and medical professionals from the prefecture gathered to exchange information. On March 18, Miyagi Prefecture (“Prefecture”), Sendai City, mental health and welfare centers in Sendai City and the Prefecture, Tohoku University, and organizations involved in mental health and medical welfare in the Prefecture gathered to analyze the situation and consider further support. This meeting was convened by the Prefecture’s Disability Welfare Division as the Mental Health Care Measures Meeting and held regularly until July. In the April meeting, members indicated the need for mid- to long-term mental healthcare, and the Prefecture approached the Miyagi Prefecture Mental Health and Welfare Association (“Association”) regarding the management of such an operation.

At a general meeting in May of the same year, the Association approved the management of a “mental healthcare center.” The Prefecture secured the budget for the earthquake reconstruction fund project in the August supplementary budget. Afterward, the Prefecture officially decided to entrust the operation to the “mental healthcare center” in September. The preparatory office for the “mental healthcare center” was set up on November 1 and formally established in Sendai (Core Center) on December 1. Meanwhile, the Prefecture conducted interviews with representatives from disaster-affected coastal cities and towns to understand the issues and needs for mental healthcare after the dispatch of the mental healthcare team. The results showed that the affected cities and towns were short of mental healthcare personnel and needed specialists, but local governments struggled to hire mental health professionals on their own. They requested that the Prefecture dispatch these personnel. The Prefecture requested the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare (MHLW) to provide two types of personnel ① specialist staff for the management of the new mental healthcare center, and ② mental healthcare specialists requested by the affected cities and towns.

To secure the needed mental healthcare personnel after the earthquake, the MHLW established the Mental Health Care Personnel Securing Network (Network) and served as its secretariat. This Network consisted of professional organizations: the Japanese Association of Certified Social Workers, Japanese Association of Mental Health Social Workers, Japanese Society of Certified Clinical Psychologists, Japanese Association of Occupational Therapists, Japan Psychiatric Nurses Association, and National Council for Community Living Support for People with Mental Disabilities.

At the request of the Prefecture, the MHLW inquired about professionals who could work with the organizations in the Network, but each professional organization requested that the professionals to be employed be guaranteed the salaries from their previous jobs. This was because some professionals would resign and apply for the position. However, people hired by local governments are hired as fiscal-year staff or according to some other similar system. That is, it was difficult to institutionally guarantee the salaries of previous jobs. Meanwhile, the Association is a general incorporated association (now public interest incorporated association) and can decide its own salary regulations; the salaries of the professionals to be employed can be guaranteed. After discussions between the Prefecture and the Association, they decided that for point ②, the Association would hire the professionals desired by each city or town and provide support through full-time work with direct commutes. This was the beginning of the secondment system adopted by the MDMHCC.

Our job postings clearly stated that staff could be seconded to cities and towns, which we also communicated through job interviews. The seconded staff were sent a notice of working conditions as well as an employment notice stating that “your employment location is XX City Hall (or XX Town Hall). Your duties will involve supporting disaster victims in XX City (XX Town).” We also guaranteed the same salaries for professionals who had left their previous jobs.

In March 2012, we decided to dispatch staff on secondment to two affected cities. In FY 2012, six staff members were dispatched to five cities, towns, and villages, and the number of seconded staff gradually increased. The largest number of seconded staff was reached in FY 2013 and FY 2014, with 11 seconded staff being dispatched for each year. Afterward, the number of seconded staff decreased gradually, and the secondment system was abolished at the end of FY 2020.

Table 1 shows the annual shifts in the number of seconded staff by seconding city or town. A total of 19 staff were seconded. In terms of occupation, mental health social workers comprised the largest number, at 13 people, followed by clinical psychologists, occupational therapists, and nurses.

Table 1. Annual shifts in number of seconded staff by destination (as of the end of each fiscal year)

Year (Western)	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Year (Japanese)	H23	H24	H25	H26	H27	H28	H29	H30	R1	R2
Kesenuma City		1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Minamisanriku Town				1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Onagawa Town		1	2	2	1	1	1	1	1	1
Ishinomaki City	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	
Higashimatsushima City	1	2	3	2	1	1	1	1	1	1
Shiogama City			1	1	1	1	1	1	1	
Natori City			1	1	2	2	2	1	1	1
Iwanuma City			1	1						
MPEHWO		1	1	1						
Total	2	6	11	11	8	8	8	7	7	5

(Note) MPEHWO refers to the Miyagi Prefecture Eastern Health and Welfare Office (Ishinomaki Health Center)

4. Establishment of the secondment system

(1) General meaning of secondment

Looking up the term “secondment” gives the definition of “taking up a job at another company or government office by order” (Kojien, 5th edition) and “taking up a job at another company or government office while remaining in the same company” (Meikyo Kokugo Jiten). In other words, the staff members belong to their seconded organization but will be responsible for the work of the seconding organization.

In the case of civil servants, “secondment” refers to “local government dispatch,”⁽³⁾ as stipulated in the Local Autonomy Act. In the case of a dispatch from a prefecture to a city, for example, the “Dispatch of personnel” stipulated by this law sets the prefecture as the seconding organization, and the division to which the staff member belongs is specified in the appointment order. The salary of the seconded staff is paid by the seconding organization, and the staff’s work hours and other duties are in accordance with the seconding organization’s work rules, with the staff being responsible for the work of the seconding organization. Given the legal basis under the Local Autonomy Act, the staff’s rights and obligations as civil servants will continue, and their status is also guaranteed. At the end of the secondment, the staff members return to their original prefectural division to which they belong. However, secondment in the MDMHCC had a different meaning from the general one described in the dictionary and this “local government dispatch.”

(2) Initial secondment system adopted by the MDMHCC

As mentioned above, the MDMHCC adopted the secondment system in March 2012. The seconding organization was decided for seconded staff upon being newly hired, and the staff started working in the seconding organization without a clear division to which the staff belonged within the seconded organization.

The labor contract between the staff and the MDMHCC stated that the place of work would be the seconding city or town, the content of the work to be conducted would be “supporting disaster victims in the seconding city or town,” and that the MDMHCC would pay the staff’s salary and various allowances, with holidays and other aspects following the MDMHCC’s work rules. The seconded staff members are not staff members of the seconding city or town. Thus, the MDMHCC also provided cars and computers that the seconded staff could use. In other words, the staff members were MDMHCC staff members, and the “secondment system” was such that staff would only be performing work to support disaster victims at the seconding organization.

(3) Dispatch by written agreement with seconding city or town

The MDMHCC is a private organization run by a corporation and has no legal basis for secondments with government agencies. At the beginning of the fiscal year, the seconding city or town and the Association signed an Agreement of Support by Mental Health Professionals. The agreement included the name, job type, place of work, and one-year contract of the seconded professional. Two agreement contents of note were that “the work to be conducted by the dispatched professional will be conducted according to the instructions of the seconding city or town” and “the status, salary, travel expenses, and other personnel management of the seconded staff will be handled according to the provisions of the seconded organization.”

The corporation’s private staff members are involved in the public business of a city or town. Therefore, a Confidentiality and Personal Information Pledge was exchanged between the seconding city or town and the seconded staff. The main content was that the staff would comply with the seconding city or town’s personal information protection ordinance and other regulations regarding personal information.

(4) Different understanding among staff

The policy of the MDMHCC at the time of its establishment was that seconded staff would work in the seconding city or town but would provide mental health support to the city or town in cooperation with the regional center staff in charge of that city or town. However, this policy was not clearly communicated to all staff, and some regional center staff members thought that seconded staff members were seconded from the Core Center, with instructions from the MDMHCC coming from the Core Center.

The appointment order for seconded staff hired in FY 2012 simply stated, “You will be hired as a staff member of the Miyagi Disaster Mental Health Care Center. Your place of work is XX City (XX Town).” The division to which the staff belonged was not specified. Therefore, seconded staff members were unsure of the division to which they belonged within the seconded organization, and when faced with issues at the seconding organization, they had trouble knowing whom to consult. Additionally, information from the MDMHCC did not reach the seconded staff through the regional centers, resulting in a sense of isolation among seconded staff, such as being in the dark about information and being caught between the seconding organization’s work and the regional center’s work.

(5) Notification of basic policy

Given the varied understanding of the secondment system adopted by the MDMHCC among staff, the MDMHCC established in December 2013 a basic policy regarding the MDMHCC’s secondment system and notified to all staff members to reach a common understanding of this system. The notification content is as follows. The full text is reproduced below.

Basic policy of secondment system: Dated December 18, 2013

The Miyagi Disaster Mental Health Care Center has been endeavoring to secure mental health and welfare professionals to support victims of the Great East Japan Earthquake and people who support those victims. Since April 2012, we have been seconding these professionals to affected cities and towns in a full-time capacity.

Various issues have previously been raised regarding this secondment system, but there has been particular concern and strong interest from various sides regarding the duration of the secondment. Affected cities and towns have requested that it continue in the future.

The secondment system enters its third year in FY 2014, and we would like to present the following basic policy for the future of the secondment system to allay the concerns and anxieties of those involved to the extent possible.

1. Secondment period

The secondment period to affected cities and towns will be until a system is in place to the extent that the city's or town's employees can handle their affected city's or town's health- and welfare-related work on their own. Specifically, the period will be until a certain time (six months to one year) has passed since the victims living in temporary housing or private rental housing in the affected city or town have moved into their rebuilt homes or disaster public housing, and where there are no more residents in temporary housing or a similar situation.

2. Measures for after the end of the secondment period

(1) Cities and towns that request support even after the end of the period will be given support by each regional support division as needed.

(2) The employment contract of the seconded staff after the end of the period will be discussed individually for each case.

3. Work duties of seconded staff

The work duties of the seconded staff include providing mental healthcare to disaster victims in the seconding city or town and, in some cases, being responsible for some of the regular health- and welfare-related work in support of municipal staff.

4. Relationship between seconded staff and each regional support division

The relationship between the seconded staff and each regional support division is as described in the attached document, Position of Seconded Staff to Cities, Towns, and Others.

Contents of the attached document Position of Seconded Staff to Cities, Towns, and Others

The relationship with the seconding city or town is as follows: "the seconded individual is an employee of the municipality in the public eye."

- Receives orders for daily work
- Receives orders for business trips related to municipal work
- Work hours and other duties are equivalent to those of municipal staff

The relationship with the regional center is as follows: "the seconded individual is also a staff member of the regional center"

- Receives advice from the regional center on work-related matters
- Cooperates with the work of the regional center with the consent of their superior in the municipality
- Attends regular meetings of the regional center with the consent of their superior in the municipality
- Attends business trips to the mental health care center with the consent of their superior in the municipality

In such cases, the regional center division manager must approve the business trip.

- The regional center's section chief must approve attendance, such as taking leave.

To achieve a common understanding among staff, MDMHCC disseminated this basic policy to all staff members. Appointment orders for seconded staff also specified the division to which the staff belonged, such as "You are ordered to work at the XX Regional Center Regional Support Division, and you will also be seconded to XX City (XX Town)."

These initiatives clarified that seconded personnel were staff members of each regional support division, and information about the MDMHCC was transmitted through their affiliated division manager. Nonetheless, it took some time for the situation to become satisfactory among seconded staff.

(6) Second notification of basic policy

Despite the notification in December 2013, the burden on seconded staff was not necessarily reduced. The salaries of seconded staff were paid by the seconded organization, and the MDMHCC had to keep track of their annual paid leave and overtime work. This resulted in seconded staff having to apply twice, both to the municipality and to the MDMHCC. To reduce the workload of seconded staff to the extent possible, the

MDMHCC issued a second notification of the basic policy of the secondment system in April 2015. The notification content is as follows.

FY 2015: Policy for Staff Seconded to Cities and Towns
Notification to Staff Dated April 1, 2015

The positioning of staff seconded to cities and towns has been handled according to the attached document, but given some confusion regarding work instructions and leaves, in FY 2015, the following aspects are re-affirmed, and new procedures are put into place regarding leaves.

Notes

(1) Work instructions and orders

Seconded staff are staff members of the Miyagi Disaster Mental Health Care Center but will receive instructions and orders regarding their daily work from their superiors in the seconding municipality. (However, if any doubts arise regarding work content, the staff will consult the Miyagi Disaster Mental Health Care Center.)

(2) Consultation and advice

The Miyagi Disaster Mental Health Care Center will proactively respond to inquiries and advice from seconded staff.

(3) Provision of information

Regarding the provision of information on meetings, training, administrative correspondence, and other aspects for staff seconded to cities or towns, even more consideration will be given, even at the cost of some duplicate information, to ensure that no information is overlooked by staff members.

(4) Taking annual paid leaves

When seconded staff members take annual paid leaves, they previously contacted both the municipality and the Miyagi Disaster Mental Health Care Center each time and obtained approval from the center's division manager. In FY 2015, the staff member will only need to obtain confirmation from their municipal supervisor; the center's division manager does not have to be contacted. However, approval from the center's section chief for all leaves taken in a given month will be obtained at the beginning of the following month.

(5) Taking special leaves

Taking special leaves will be handled in the same manner as before.

(6) Overtime work

Cases where seconded staff members work overtime will be handled in the same manner as annual paid leaves.

5. Seconded staff meetings

Seconded staff requested the establishment of a forum where they could talk about problems they are having and exchange information with one another. Thus, a seconded staff meeting was held. The seconded staff meeting was formally positioned as a part of the Miyagi Disaster Mental Health Care Center's work by writing it in the meeting guidelines. Chapter 4 of the Guidelines for Establishing Various Meetings at the Miyagi Disaster Mental Health Care Center, which came into effect on April 1, 2014, refers to the seconded staff meetings. Meetings were held according to the guidelines in Articles 13–16. The articles are given below.

Guidelines for Establishing Various Meetings at the Miyagi Disaster Mental Health Care Center (effective April 1, 2014)

Chapter 4: Seconded staff meetings

(Purpose of seconded staff meetings)

Article 13: The seconded staff meeting will be established to enable staff members seconded to cities, towns, and other areas to conduct their duties smoothly at their seconded organization, and to facilitate the exchange and sharing of information among seconded staff.

(Composition of seconded staff meetings)

Article 14: Members of the seconded staff meeting will be as follows.

Staff seconded to municipalities, regional support division managers, coordination division managers, regional center regional support division managers

(Note: All positions held at the time of meeting)

2. If a member has special circumstances, a deputy or other person can attend the meeting in their place.
3. The regional support section director and planning and coordination section director may attend as observers.

(Convening seconded staff meetings)

Article 15: The seconded staff meeting will be convened by the Core Center Regional Support Division manager.

2. As a general rule, the seconded staff meeting will be held on the day of the general staff meeting.

(General affairs of the seconded staff meeting)

Article 16: The general affairs of the seconded staff meeting will be handled by the Core Center Regional Support Division manager.

Specific contents of the seconded staff meeting are described in detail in “About the seconded staff meeting” by Tenma⁽²⁾. The first seconded staff meeting was held in May 2014. The participants were seconded staff, the regional support section director, and the regional support division managers (Core Center, Ishinomaki Regional Center, Kesenuma Regional Center). Seconded staff exchanged status reports and information. As a result of discussions, the members decided to hold meetings once every two months in conjunction with the general staff meetings, where all MDMHCC staff gathered. In FY 2014, eight seconded staff meetings were held. In FY 2015, nine meetings were held; in FY 2016, eight meetings; in FY 2017, three meetings; in FY 2018, two meetings; and in FY 2019, two meetings.

As the number of general staff meetings decreased, the frequency of seconded staff meetings also decreased. Furthermore, owing to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, in-person meetings were not held in FY 2020. Seconded staff meetings were no longer held.

On April 1, 2017, the guidelines for setting various meetings were reviewed, and the seconded staff meetings were also revised, with the main change being that the purpose of the seconded staff meetings was to solve problems faced by seconded staff.

6. Opinions of seconded staff

In FY 2023, we asked several staff members who had experience with secondment to submit manuscripts. The requested content included the work content of seconded staff, benefits of secondment, difficulties faced by seconded staff, and opinions on the secondment system. Publishing the manuscripts of the seconded staff as they were would have revealed the individuals and seconding cities and towns. As such, they have been compiled by the author to the extent that the intent has not been changed.

Differences in opinion emerged depending on the secondment period and municipality to which the contributor was seconded, but many of the comments were important for examining the secondment system. We have endeavored to respect the opinions of the contributors and include as many as possible, even if there was some overlap.

(1) Benefits of secondment

① Learning through secondment

- I was able to learn through working with public health nurses in cities and towns where public health nurses are active in a wide range of fields, including maternal and child, adult, and mental health. I was able to deepen my understanding of the role of public health nurses in the government. By taking on an administrative role, I was able to learn a lot, such as through home visits and cooperation with related institutions.
- I realized the difficulty of the work of a municipal public health nurse and learned that they provide careful resident services, which include not only health checks for children in infant health checkups but also support for parents and cooperation with other organizations.
- I think it was a valuable experience to be able to work in the government as a mental health social worker. I also think that it was an opportunity to publicize the existence of mental health social workers to the government, other organizations, and residents. I think it was an opportunity to promote a broad understanding of mental health.

② Benefits of being dispatched full-time to a city or town

- Thanks to being dispatched full-time to a city or town, I was able to directly approach disaster victims without time constraints.
- I was able to hear the real voices of disaster-affected residents.
- I was able to provide support to areas that were out of reach for the busy municipal public health nurses.
- I was very happy to see the municipal staff and residents getting better over time. It was a valuable experience.

(2) Difficulties of seconded staff

① Difficulty of “following the instructions of the seconding city or town” and ambiguity of work content

- When the policies of the Miyagi Disaster Mental Health Care Center or the regional center differed from those of the seconding city or town, the general rule was to follow the instructions of the superior at the seconding organization, but I felt confused when I was involved in work other than “post-earthquake mental healthcare.”
- If the work content and role were clearly defined, the work I could do would be limited, and the seconding organization would think that I am difficult to handle, so I understood the rule of “following the instructions of the superior at the seconding organization,” but there were times when I was asked to do non-mental healthcare-related work, and there were also times when I was unsure of how much I should be working on this. It is difficult for the seconded staff member to refuse, so I think it is necessary for consultations with the center each time; but I think that it would have been better to examine the work a little more carefully before deciding on the work at hand.
- What is required inevitably changes depending on the region, municipal system, public health nurses’ way of thinking, and the capabilities of the seconded staff member. Even though we are all referred to as “seconded,” I think the work content varied considerably for each individual.
- There were times when I was unsure what the seconded staff member’s role was and how much they could do. I think it’s inevitable that there would be some differences, and I think a clearer line should have been drawn.

② Ambiguous affiliation

- The written employment contract indicated that I was affiliated with the Miyagi Disaster Mental Health Care Center, and that my work location, work duties, and so on were with the seconding city or town. However, when it came to the actual work, I felt like I did not belong to either the Miyagi Disaster Mental Health Care Center or the seconding city or town, and it was difficult to remain motivated. I also felt that I was treated differently from public health nurses who were seconded to the city or town from other prefectures.
- In the early days of my secondment, there were many people who were seconded from other institutions, but this was different from the secondment of our center. Our center’s secondment was different from the typical secondment, and the original affiliation was unclear, so I felt confused.
- I am a staff member at our center, and not a municipal staff member, but I am seconded to the municipality. That was my thought process, but there were times when I was not treated as a staff member of our center, and I sometimes thought that I was affiliated with neither the seconding municipality nor the center.

③ Burden of double work at the seconding organization and the MDMHCC

- The format was a full-time support system to the seconding municipality, but I felt like I was doing double the work because I was required to attend meetings, training, and large events at our center.
- I was required to attend conferences and meetings at both the seconding municipality and our center, so it felt like I was doing double the work. I also felt that having to double the number of work reports for the municipality and our center was an excessive burden.
- I wish I could have just stayed at the seconding organization full-time instead of going back and forth between our center and the seconding organization.

④ Insufficient communication of information to seconded staff

- I was not given any explanation of the work content or the role I would be assigned to before being seconded, so I felt anxious when working at the seconding city or town.
- There were times when information from the Core Center or the regional center was not fully distributed to seconded staff. At first, I thought it was a problem with the information transmission routes not being established, but I think it was just a matter of forgetting to communicate the information, and also differences in perception on how much should be communicated to seconded staff.
- There were various instances where the seconded staff was only informed of the result. At the Core Center or regional centers, you would naturally hear about partial progress and be able to find out about it on a daily basis, but seconded staff had little opportunity to find out about such progress, and there were many instances where only the result is shared at meetings. I think there were hardly any opportunities to express opinions or ask questions partway through. I often felt left out.

⑤ Stress at the seconding location

- I think the way of thinking differed depending on the seconded staff member, but in a sense the seconded staff member was seen as a representative of the Miyagi Disaster Mental Health Care Center, so I paid close attention to my behavior, words, and attitude toward work so as not to be rude or embarrassing toward the seconding city or town. Therefore, I was always stressed. I realized again that the position of being seconded is a mentally stressful position to begin with.

⑥ Recording of work content and hand-over system

- I think it would have been better as a mental healthcare center for them to have decided on a method for recording and storing the work content of seconded staff. There were times when the seconded staff member who took over had difficulty understanding the work content of their predecessor. I don't think it's good to find yourself in a situation where you don't know anything about the progress made until a seconded staff member has withdrawn from the position.
- I think the mental healthcare center should have decided on a hand-over method when a seconded staff member is replaced. In my case, although there was a certain amount of time for the hand-over, there was no particular record of what kind of work was done by the previous seconded staff member, which was a problem.

(3) Opinions about the secondment system

- I think that the system was difficult regardless of the innovations implemented. I felt that the system where the affiliation is the Miyagi Disaster Mental Health Care Center and the work content was issued by the seconding municipality put the staff member in an indecisive position as a seconded staff member. Of course, I am not a municipal staff member, so when the mental healthcare center told me to "work according to the municipality," since I thought of myself as a staff member of the mental healthcare center before being seconded, I felt a bit lonely because I did not belong anywhere.
- The secondment system implemented this time was often vague, and seconded staff members were often stressed. It would have been easier to operate if the city or town had somehow allocated a budget and made them municipal staff.
- In the future, when dispatching seconded staff to affected cities or towns following a large-scale disaster, I would like to have a more detailed system that considers the stress and isolation felt by seconded staff. I think there were many seconded staff members who were seconded to cities or towns alone and struggled with their feelings of anxiety or isolation because they were unable to talk about them. It was very meaningful to hold seconded staff meetings as a place where we could talk about anything.
- A place for seconded staff and managers to talk at least once a year should be set up, and we should have a place to share the thoughts of seconded staff so that seconded staff do not become isolated. The system needs to be more considerate of seconded staff.
- If there is a request from a city or town, it may be possible to respond by increasing the number of dispatches rather than implementing a secondment.
- I think it is important to discuss with the city or town how the seconded staff will enter the city or town before introducing a secondment system and entering the city or town.
- I think the secondment system adopted by our center is a fairly flexible system, but if the basic policy is simply that "the seconded staff will follow the municipality," problems can arise at the workplace. I think it is necessary to share with the municipality why the center is seconding people there while considering each case, and to clearly explain this to the seconded and center staff.

7. Discussion

This discussion accounts for the issues with the secondment system from the perspective of a manager who has been coordinating secondments. This section presents the author's personal opinion.

(1) Benefits of the secondment system

The secondment system adopted by our center was implemented in response to a request from the Prefecture after a survey of the affected coastal cities and towns, which noted “a shortage of mental healthcare professionals” that was “difficult for the cities and towns to secure on their own, so they would like the prefecture to dispatch them.” The decision was made in consultation with the Prefecture, but given the MDMHCC’s philosophy of “improving regional mental health and welfare, with the municipality at the center,” we were proactive in introducing it.

Seconding mental health experts to the affected cities and towns, which had an extreme shortage of public health nurses after the disaster, can be said to have helped facilitate the smooth execution of mental healthcare work in the municipalities and reduce their workload.

Additionally, the mental health social worker was the most common type of seconded professional. Prior to the disaster, no mental health social workers had been employed by the cities or towns. As such, the seconding municipalities initially expressed concerns about the kind of work that a mental health social worker would be responsible for; gradually, their understanding of the expertise of such workers deepened. They highly lauded the workers’ appropriate support of disaster victims through visiting activities, teamwork among supporters, and coordination with related institutions. The workers also conducted accompanying visits and case study meetings to contribute to the development of supporters in the disaster-affected areas. Consequently, cities and towns began to employ mental health social workers. The secondment system can be said to have had a large and lasting impact.

(2) Conditions for introduction of the secondment system

The secondment system was introduced with an insufficient system design, leading to problems in the relationship between the seconding and seconded organizations, as well as the work rules for the seconded staff, which needed to be established as the system was put into operation. Therefore, it took time before a unified understanding was present among staff, resulting in the emergence of problems, such as seconded staff members being placed under an excessive burden.

When introducing secondment as a new system, it should ideally be a system that is easy to understand. It should be initiated through consensus among staff members. I think it would have been ideal to have drawn up highly detailed plans, such as the creation of guidelines setting out basic policies, contents of contracts between the MDMHCC (seconded organization) and municipalities (seconding organization), work content, protection of personal information of public institutions, and information management on computers. Innovations for reducing the burden on seconded staff are also necessary. Examples include clearly defining the duration, reducing the amount of overlapping work between the seconding and seconded organizations as much as possible, and clearly identifying the person in charge at the seconded organization whom the seconded staff member can consult when facing difficulties. It should also be made clear that the employment contract will continue even after the end of the secondment.

(3) Support system based on business trips rather than secondment

At the time of the establishment of the MDMHCC, support staff gathered from all over the country, from Hokkaido in the north to Okinawa in the south, with personnel constituting a wide range of professionals (physicians, public health nurses, nurses, mental health social workers, social workers, clinical psychologists, occupational therapists) and spanning a wide age range from their 20s to 60s. These people included experts with various backgrounds, such as those with or without clinical administrative experience in medicine, and those who had or had not experienced disasters. They were hastily assembled into teams for work. Adopting an operating structure that is as easy to understand as possible would be desirable when organizing and effectively managing such an organization.

The author believes that operation would have been easier if staff from the base office had formed teams and traveled to the affected municipalities to provide support, rather than adopting a secondment system. However, if the supported municipalities are far away from the base office from which the staff are dispatched and the travel time is long, a secondment system may have to be considered. There are also benefits to the secondment system, so we hope that the MDMHCC’s experience will be useful when introducing the secondment system in future mental healthcare centers.

References

- (1) “Miyagi Disaster Mental Health Care Center FY2012 Bulletin No. 1”
- (1) “Miyagi Disaster Mental Health Care Center FY2015 Bulletin No. 4”
- (3) “Dispatch of personnel” stipulated in the Local Autonomy Act

252-17, Paragraph 1: “When it is judged that there is a special need for an ordinary local public entity to handle affairs, the entity may request another ordinary local public entity’s chief, committee, or committee members to dispatch personnel of the relevant ordinary local public entity.”

Paragraph 2: “Personnel dispatched in response to a request under the provisions in the previous paragraph shall also have the status of personnel of the ordinary local public entity to which they are dispatched, and their salaries, allowances (excluding retirement allowances), and travel expenses shall be the responsibility of the ordinary local public entity to which the relevant personnel is dispatched, while retirement allowances and retirement pensions or lump-sum payments shall be the responsibility of the ordinary local public entity that dispatched the relevant personnel.”