

June 01, 2020

Disaster Response Guidelines for
volunteers and non-profit
organizations during the COVID-19
pandemic

JVAD

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1. Background and Summary of the Guideline Development

Until recently, relief efforts were rushed to disaster affected areas in a swift, short-term, and intensive nationwide response. However, there is an urgent need to reconsider how disaster relief is conducted if a natural disaster occurs during the current COVID-19 pandemic. In order to prevent the spread of COVID-19, relief activities that were common before, such as those requiring a large number of people or activities involving assembling and speaking with residents, are no longer viable in the manner that they were carried out in the past.

Within the core principles of the Sphere Handbook ^{*1} (Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Humanitarian Response) are that people affected by disasters have the right to a life with dignity and, therefore, the right to aid, and that all possible steps should be taken to alleviate human suffering arising from a disaster. It also provides the ethical and legal backdrop to the Protection Principles which ensure that people have access to necessary aid without discrimination and that people are to be protected from further harm.

However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, a major issue lies with how to provide relief to the affected population to secure their health and dignity while also ensuring that supporters do not spread the virus and are protected themselves. In the past, many activities had been carried out independently and freely by volunteers and NPOs, but now several areas must be reconsidered to prevent the spread of the virus. These guidelines are intended to cover some of the difficult issues such as the creation of rules for infection prevention, deepening the understanding of supporters, and pursuing the active collaboration between local governments, social welfare councils and NPOs (triangular cooperation).

This guideline has been prepared by JVOAD in collaboration with its associated members (listed in the appendix) for volunteers and NPOs that have been active as practitioners in disaster relief, as well as for those who seek to get newly involved. The objective is to provide guidance in disaster relief responses and decision making under the current COVID-19 circumstances, as well as to keep local governments and related entities well informed. The items in this guideline are by no means obligations, rather, we hope it can be used as a reference for decision making in response measures, as the state of COVID-19 is different among regions and areas.

*The content of this guideline will be updated as necessary.

*1 The Sphere Handbook (<https://spherestandards.org/handbook-2018/>)

2. Major Differences from Past Disaster Responses

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, disaster response will be very different from situations in the past.

Key points to consider in terms of relief efforts include equipment, insurance, and limitations to

activities. The full list is as follows:

New points to consider

- Relief efforts on-site may lead to spreading the virus in disaster affected areas.
- The use of new equipment to prevent infection in order to protect both the affected communities and the supporters.
- Relief activities will take place with limited access to face masks, disinfectant, and other personal protective equipment.
- The scope of volunteer insurance coverage may be different and requires confirmation. *See Chapter 6 for more information.
- Measures must be taken to avoid the “3Cs (Closed spaces, Crowded places and Close-contact settings)” and working in large groups.
- Activities involving local residents must be planned with caution.
- Participating in on-site relief activities may result in being vulnerable to misinformation.

3. Basic Policy

The basic policies for disaster response by Non-Profit Organizations (NPOs) and volunteers during the COVID-19 pandemic are as follows:

- 1 Careful consideration and respect towards local interests are to be taken into account when planning relief activities in disaster affected areas.
- 2 Relief efforts are to primarily be conducted from within affected areas. In principle, external relief will be limited to remote support.
- 3 In the event that there are requests from the local disaster response headquarters or local authorities, supporters with the necessary know-how may carry out relief activities on site.

(Depending on the scale of the disaster, there may be cases where local entities are unable to request external support or where the capacity of the local support system is overwhelmed. In these cases, external support groups may be dispatched on-site).

*In this guideline, “area” mainly refers to prefectures, but may also refer to municipalities under certain circumstances.

4. Disaster Relief Volunteer Center / General Volunteers

The following guidelines have been published by the Japan National Council of Social Welfare.

As a general rule, relief activities which call for widespread participation of volunteers should not be carried out at the disaster relief volunteer centers.

Volunteers participating at their own discretion may lead to spreading the virus.

If you are an independent volunteer, please be sure to check for information from the affected area's disaster relief volunteer center.

Operating Disaster Relief Volunteer Centers

The COVID-19 pandemic poses concerns over the following risks:

1. Bringing the virus to the disaster affected areas.
2. Bringing back the virus from the disaster affected areas
3. Spreading the virus via close contact with residents affected by the disaster or other volunteers

among other concerns.

As a result, a widespread call for volunteers must not take place if a state of emergency is in effect or if there are ongoing risks of spreading the virus. Calls for volunteers must be limited to the regions around the affected disaster areas, centered on local residents and residents from nearby areas.

In cases where municipalities are unable to sufficiently conduct relief activities and choose to expand their call for volunteers to neighboring municipalities or prefectures, the decision is to be made in consideration of the opinions of local residents, authorities and those with technical expertise. The needs and calls for aid from affected residents include cases which, in addition to the support provided by volunteers, need to be handled by local social welfare workers, authorities, or businesses.

The social welfare council works as an intermediary coordinator for these needs.

Source:

“Implementation and Operation of Disaster Relief Volunteer Centers in Times of COVID-19 (Japan National Social Welfare Council, Point of View)” <https://www.saigaivc.com/> (In Japanese)



5-1. Non-Profit Organizations and Other Support Organizations

It is expected among NPOs and other support groups that local organizations within the affected region are to serve as the main actors in relief activities.

Please make sure to confirm the policies published by the disaster relief network in the affected area or intermediary support organizations in charge of disaster response. JVOAD collaborates with the intermediary support organizations prior to the occurrence of disasters, working to organize systems to share information.

* The “Intermediary support organizations” in this guideline refer to organizations with existing support functions for disasters.

The following responses are expected to take place regarding local activities:

Advance Team • Assessment

- In principle, damage assessment visits to the disaster affected areas are not to be carried out by support organizations.
- Primarily, information should be collected remotely when possible. Gather information from local authorities and intermediary support organizations in charge of disaster relief.
(Information such as damage to infrastructure and housing, evacuation information, lifelines, etc.)
- Depending on the scale and circumstances of the disaster, a small assessment team consisting of a few, experienced staffers may be deployed in cases where local entities are not able to call for external support or send information.



*The Japan Social Welfare Council, the Joint Committee for Coordinating and Supporting Voluntary Disaster Relief Activities (Shien P), together with JVOAD, will collect local information through their networks and provide this information to support related organizations and individuals.

Relief Activities

- Necessary relief activities are to be carried out by local organizations based on appropriate measures to prevent the spread of the virus.
- When conducting relief activities, check with the intermediary support organizations for information and be sure to share information and reports from your activities. (A method for sharing information shall be arranged by the intermediary support organizations.)
- In the event there is a request for external support from local entities, supporters with the necessary skills and know-how are to consider if they will carry out relief activities on-site on the notion that activities will not lead to spreading the virus. (The local request may come from the government, disaster relief volunteer centers, intermediary support organizations or local communities, etc.)



*The situation may be specially complicated under the circumstances of COVID-19, for supporting shelters, people who require additional assistance, and damaged houses.

In the event of a natural disaster, the teams will be prepared to advise and share information with local organizations, using the information published by the JVOAD Evacuation Life Improvement Expert Committee and JVOAD Technical Expert Committee, as well as by spreading the know-how beforehand.

In addition, in event of a request from local organizations, on-site activities may be carried out based on measures to prevent the spread of the virus.

(The reports and information prepared by JVOAD Technical Expert Committees can be found on the JVOAD website in Japanese).

5-2. Non-Profit Organizations and Other Support Organizations

Intercommunication Meetings

- It is recommended that meetings are held online in order to avoid the 3Cs.
(The local intermediary support organizations shall invite participants and determine the timing for these meetings)
- At the meetings, timely and detailed information will be required from the local authorities and other organizations, for it will be more challenging for the NPOs to gather information on their own.
(Information about the current status and future plans should also be made available).
- A system is to be established in which the intermediary support organization consolidates information regarding the activities of NPOs and other support organizations.
- Updates on damage, needs of the affected residents, and relief activity should be shared at the intercommunication meetings to discuss measures to respond to the tasks raised.
(When necessary, separate meetings with core members will be organized to solve specific issues)
- Ideally, external support organizations that cannot be dispatched on-site will still participate in the intercommunication meetings to share their expertise and knowledge.
- It is important to connect and generate communication between the affected areas online so they may share their current situation as well as their knowledge and response plans.



*Both parties need to confirm network accessibility when having online meetings with governmental bodies. JVOAD and other entities are considering support in online meeting systems and information collection.

Coordination with Local Authorities

- The intermediary support organization in the affected areas shall be responsible for coordinating with prefectural and/or municipality authorities.
- If the intermediary support organization is incapable of directly coordinating with municipality authorities, the coordination effort is to be sought through the prefectural government.
- Call for external support shall be determined between the local government and intermediary support organizations as needed.
- Cooperation with the authorities is important when providing relief activities at evacuation centers.



*JVOAD, in cooperation with the Japan Cabinet Office Disaster Management, will support the cooperation between the local governments of the affected areas and their intermediary support organizations, and act as a coordinator with external support organizations (as a liaison).

Liaison/Coordinator

- Coordinators with relevant skills may be dispatched as liaisons to support the collaboration between public and private sectors, better understand the local situations, share information, and determine if a call for aid is necessary (The dispatch shall be as minimal as possible).

*The dispatch decisions will be taken and coordinated with the local support organizations, Japan Cabinet Office Disaster Management, Japan National Council of Social Welfare, Disaster Relief Volunteer Project Council, JVOAD and others.

6-1. Preparation for On-site Relief Activities (Only when relief activities are necessary)

In case local supporters provide necessary relief, please be prepared with the following items and arrangements.

Equipment

Individuals and organizations must ensure that they bring necessary equipment, such as:

- Face masks
- Face shields
- Disposable gloves
- Disinfectant
- Soap
- Thermometer
- Plastic bags

Consult Medical Institutions

Make sure to consult prefectural medical headquarters through intermediate support organizations and gather information regarding infection prevention measures and how to access necessary treatment.

Accommodation and Transportation

- Secure a base of operations, such as accommodations and an office space.
- Avoid using public transportation on site as much as possible. Secure a vehicle (such as a rental car) for your exclusive use and try to avoid changing vehicles as much as possible.
- Avoid riding in cars provided by other organizations or offering a ride to members of other organizations as much as possible.

Establishing Rules for Engagement in Relief

Each organization should decide on rules regarding relief activities. *See the attached checklist

- All possible preventive measures against infection have been in place prior to the dispatch to the affected areas, such as a thorough work-from-home policy.
- Engagement in on-site activities is limited to specific staff members and all unnecessary travel is to be avoided.
- Report and record the staff members' health conditions (e.g. temperature), visitors, persons he/she met, and other activities engaged during the activity period.
- Prepare a protocol in case a staff member is infected, such as organizing a contact list and a system for consultation.
 - Communicating within the organization and with family
 - Organize a system for access to experts (medical, legal etc.)
 - Contacting insurance companies
 - Communicating with local (prefectural) medical coordination headquarters
 - Information provision to relative support groups and persons
 - Communication/information disclosure procedures
 - Organizational decision on continue/withdraw activities
- Measures such as self-quarantining at home after returning from the site will be implemented (for external supporters)

※In case infection of a staff member is confirmed during relief activities, check with medical coordination headquarters and healthcare centers, then make sure to disclose information (activity tracking, development of conditions, communications made with medical institutions etc.) while taking into account personal privacy. It is also important to disclose the information with local authorities, social welfare councils, intermediate support organizations and other related agencies to prevent spread of the virus. Information disclosure is also important to respond to the damages caused by misinformation. (Communication from the local parties will be important in order to clear damages caused by misinformation, .)

6-2. Preparation for On-site Relief Activities (Only when relief activities are necessary)

Volunteer Insurance, Domestic Travel Insurance and Workers' Accident Compensation Insurance

- **Volunteer Insurance**

Under the current policy, the following compensations will be paid for if a volunteer is infected with specified infectious diseases during their voluntary activities:

1. Funeral Expenses (Actual cost up to JPY 3 million will be covered in case of death)
 2. Insurance payment for permanent damages
 3. Insurance payment for hospitalization (JPY 6,500/day)
 4. Insurance payment for outpatient(JPY 4,000/day)
- Previously, pneumonia caused by COVID-19 was not designated as an infectious disease Class I, II or III, and was excluded from the coverage of the volunteer insurance. However, an insurance policy revision was permitted on May 1st and compensation will now cover cases of infections from COVID-19. This condition is applicable retroactively to 1st February, when it was registered as a designated infectious disease.
 - Claiming the insurance will require reasonable evidence to prove that the patient was infected during their voluntary activity. This will presumably make it difficult to provide sufficient proof to receive the payment even if the disease is within coverage.
 - Domestic travel insurance and NPO activity insurance: please contact and confirm with your insurance company for information on the scope of compensation coverage.
 - Workers' Accident Compensation Insurance: Evidence will be required in case of infection. Confirmation of individual coverage will be checked on a case-by-case basis.

Points to consider when dispatching external supporters

- Entry to the activity site is limited to specific staff members, and all unnecessary travel is to be avoided.
- All possible preventive measures against infection have been in place prior to the dispatch to the affected areas.
- Implement measures such as quarantining at home for 14 days after returning from the site.
- External supporters should not procure equipment, machineries or materials in the affected areas or surrounding areas.

(To avoid potentially spreading the virus to local shops, as well as to avoid competition over scarce items between local residents. However, this can be reconsidered in accordance with the recovery of the local economy).
- Upon dispatch, acquire necessary knowledge through training on infection preventive measures.

7. Information Services in Case of Disaster

The following organizations will be sharing information in the event of a major natural disaster during the COVID-19 pandemic. Please see the following websites (in Japanese).

Information regarding Disaster Relief Volunteer Centers

Japan National Council of Social Welfare: <https://www.saigaivc.com/>

Shien-P: <https://shienp.net/>

Information from NPOs for supporters of the affected communities

JVOAD: <http://jvoad.jp/>

The Japan National Council of Social Welfare, Shien P and JVOAD are working in collaboration and will share more details in the event of a disaster.

Sphere Handbook: <https://spherestandards.org/handbook-2018/>

Published by: Japan Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster (JVOAD)

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