

Listening to the Community: Grassroots Mental Healthcare in Local Communities

Isaac Gagné, Cultural Anthropology

In the midst of Japan’s demographic challenges of a rapidly aging and shrinking population, combined with the psychosocial effects of shrinking regions and hyper-urbanization, one of the key issues facing both urban and rural communities is “social isolation” (e.g. Ozawa-de Silva 2010; Saito et al 2012). In response, local grassroots organizations such as “Active Listening” (傾聴) NPOs have emerged to offer social welfare services such as elderly care and mental health support as well as post-disaster counseling (Nakamura 2009; Yokoyama 2018). This project examines the impact and challenges of these NPOs vis-à-vis local social welfare needs.

Research Questions

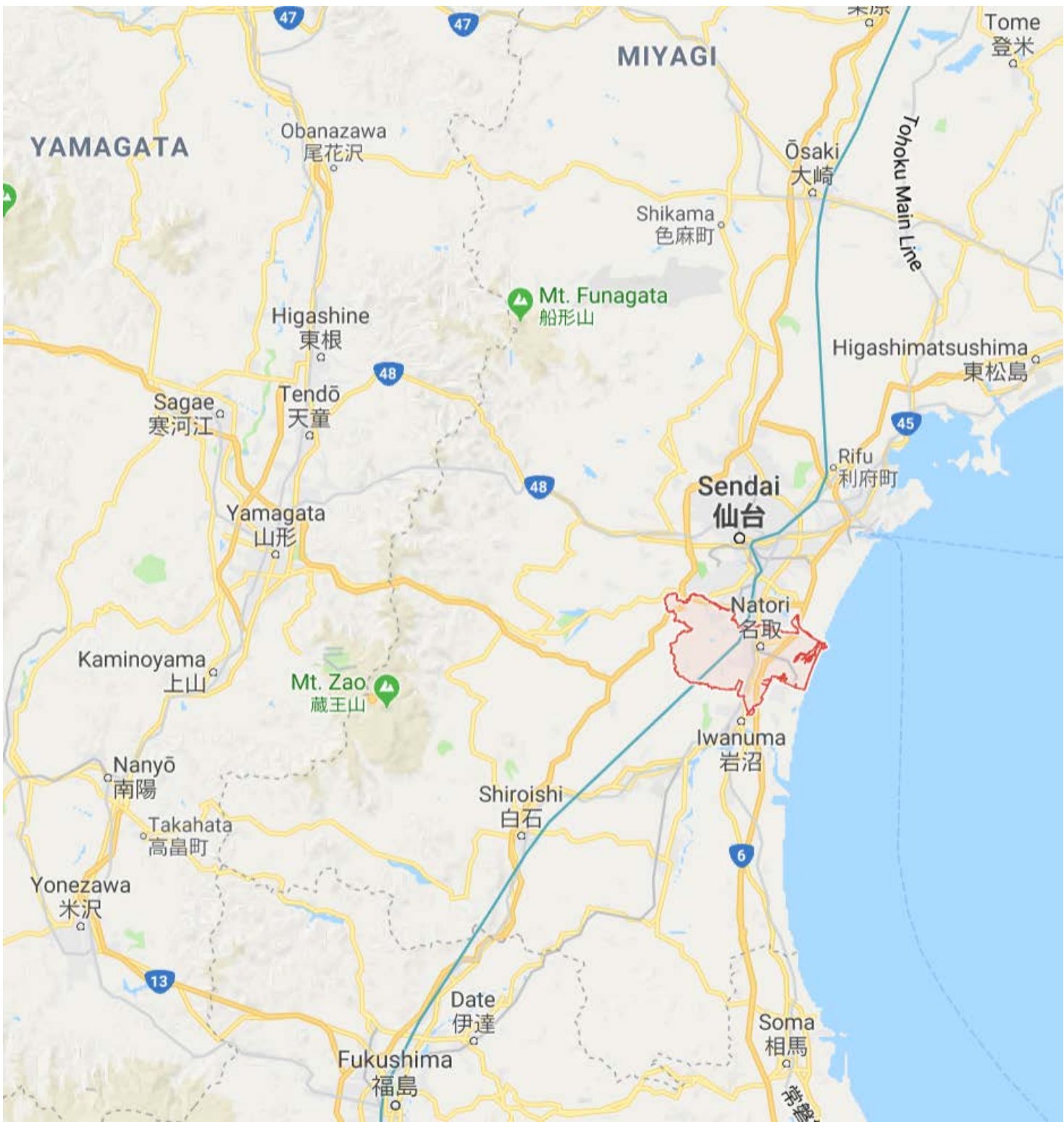
- What are the various forms of social isolation facing residents of local communities?
- What cultural aspects of interpersonal relationships and communication contribute to social isolation in Japan?
- What are the possibilities and challenges of community-based mental healthcare like “Active Listening” volunteer groups for ameliorating social isolation and other mental health needs?

Data and Methods

- Participant observation with volunteer groups in Natori (Miyagi) since 2014, and in Iida (Nagano) since 2017
- Interviews with volunteers and NPO workers



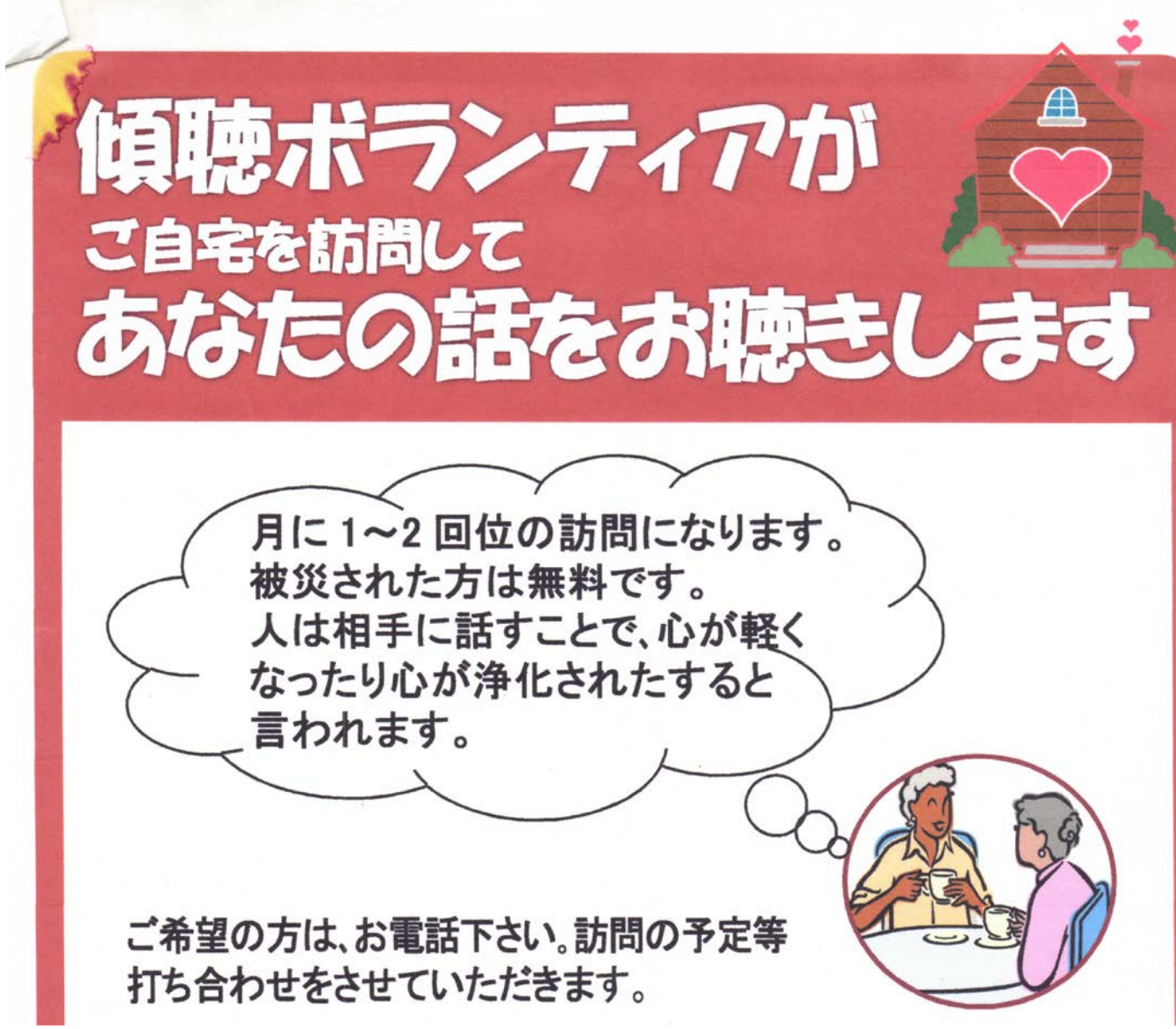
Iida City, Nagano



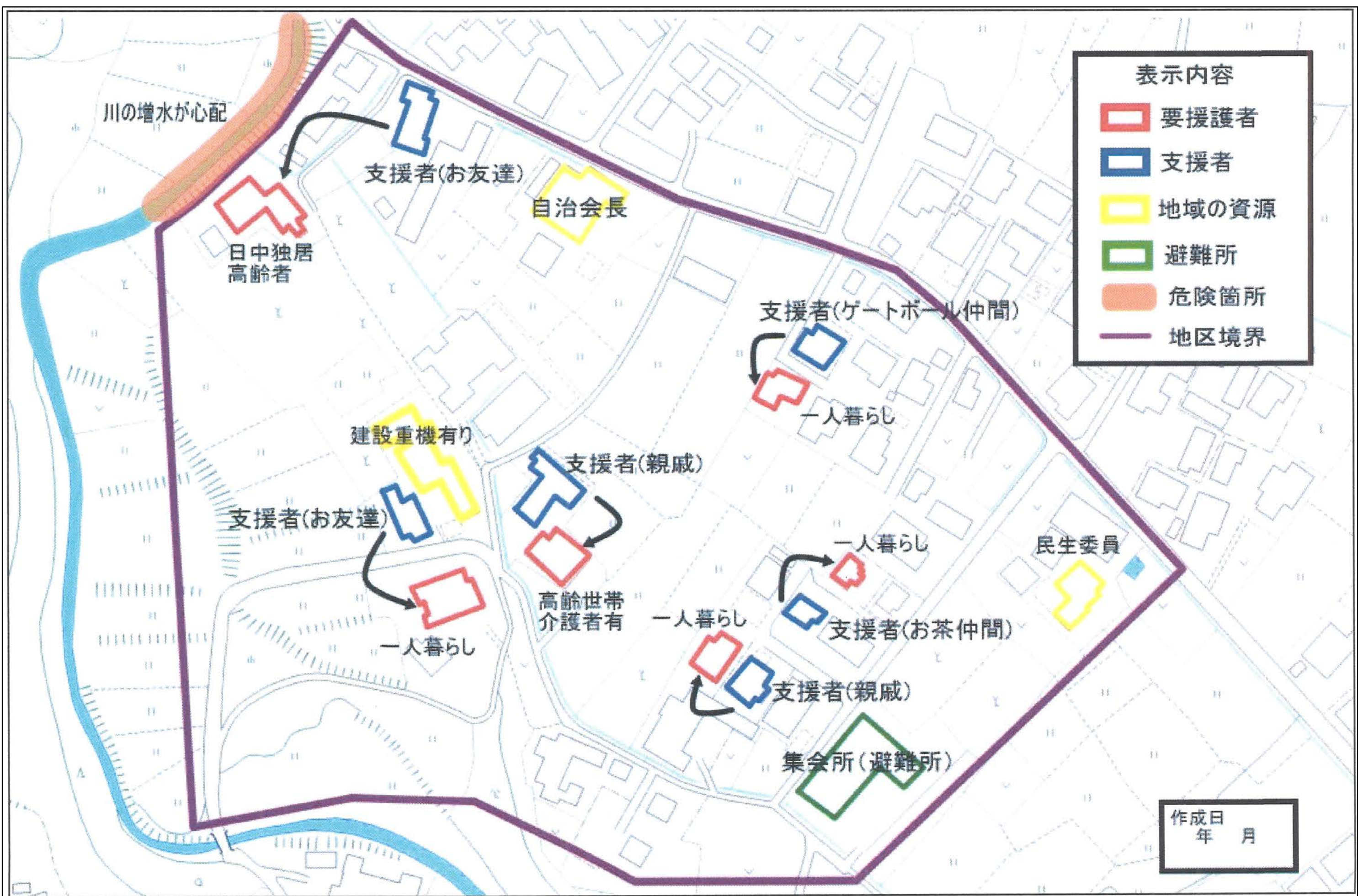
Natori City, Miyagi

Preliminary Findings

Social isolation in Japan emerges in contexts of both rural isolation and post-disaster dislocation. Thus, grassroots mental healthcare takes diverse forms depending on the local community, often coordinated with Social Welfare Councils (社会福祉協議会). In Natori, which was devastated by the March 11, 2011 tsunami, NPOs offer casual, non-professional counseling services to displaced survivors in temporary housing via “Active Listening” activities. In Iida, residents created a “Social Support Map” to foster mutual support networks. In both cases, the primary goal of providing specific social welfare services has a complimentary effect of providing psychosocial support and community building.



Active Listening Flyer (L) and Tea-time Gathering in Natori (R)



Resident Social Support Map (住民支え合いマップ) from Iida

Preliminary Conclusions

This ongoing research highlights the diverse forms of social isolation in Japan, ranging from elderly who are isolated in rural regions, to survivors of disasters whose community ties are broken due to the loss of loved ones and post-disaster displacement (see also Matsuyama et al 2016). While such forms of social isolation are not unique to Japan (e.g. Kleinman et al 1997), the strong cultural value of not being a burden (迷惑) to others exacerbates social isolation as individuals refrain from asking for support when they need it. In light of this, local volunteer groups like “Active Listening” NPOs and community-based activities like the “Social Support Map” initiative offer both psychological and social support for residents as well as opportunities for residents to create new networks with each other and create sustainable support systems.

References

Kleinman, A., Das, V., & Lock, M. (1997). *Social Suffering*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Matsuyama, Y., Aida, J., Hase, A., Sato, Y., Koyama, S., Tsuboya, T., & Osaka, K. (2016). “Do Community- and Individual-level Social Relationships Contribute to the Mental Health of Disaster Survivors? A Multilevel Prospective Study after the Great East Japan Earthquake.” *Social Science & Medicine*, 151, 187-195.

Nakamura, K. (2009). “Evaluation of “Fureai-ikiki Community Salon” as Regional Community.” *Journal of Japan Society of Home Economics*, 60(1), 25-37.

Ozawa-De Silva, C. (2010). “Shared death: self, sociality and internet group suicide in Japan.” *Transcultural psychiatry*, 47(3), 392-418.

Saito, T., Kai, I., & Takizawa, A. (2012). “Effects of a program to prevent social isolation on loneliness, depression, and subjective well-being of older adults: a randomized trial among older migrants in Japan.” *Archives of gerontology and geriatrics*, 55(3), 539-547.

Yokoyama, T. (2018). “孤立化社会における傾聴ボランティアの役割” [The role of active listening volunteers in an increasingly isolating society]. In Y. Sakurai (ed.), *幸せの宗教学* [Religious Studies of Happiness]. Tokyo: Hōzōkan.

