

## Technical Report

## Background to and Comments on the Guidebook for Those Bereaved

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The bereaved family and friends of someone who has died as a result of suicide face extreme emotional stress (grief, anger, guilt, denial, confusion, repudiation of the deceased, etc.); in addition, there are liabilities that they face such as debts left by the deceased, compensation for the damages incurred by the suicide and other legal and economic obligations. For that reason, efforts are needed within the context of suicide countermeasures to support these families. Up until recently, the emphasis on support for the bereaved has been on psychological support and mental health measures. But emotional issues are not the bereaved's only concern; many of them have problems accessing information about social resources, procedural matters after a death, counseling services, etc., as well as various livelihood and economic issues (food, clothing and housing, employment, school work, childcare, nursing care, human relations, paying off debts, dealing with inheritance matters, etc.). It is coming to be thought that urgent steps are needed to fill these information gaps and deal with livelihood and economic problems.

The Purpose provision of the revised Basic Law on Suicide Countermeasures (April 2016) stipulates that its aim is “to prevent suicide and enhance support for the relatives, etc., of suicide victims by comprehensively promoting suicide measures.” Moreover, the new General Principles of Suicide Prevention Policy (July 2017) states: “In addition to providing prompt assistance to persons bereaved by suicide, enhance support by, among other things, promoting the provision of information so that such persons, no matter where in Japan they may be, can

receive the information they need about available assistance including related measures. Also, support the activities in the community of self-help groups, etc., for bereaved families.” Five specific initiatives are cited: 1. Supporting the operations of self-help groups for bereaved families; 2. Encouraging post-crisis response in schools and workplaces; 3. Promoting the provision of information relating to the comprehensive support needs of bereaved families and others; 4. Improving the quality of personnel at public agencies who deal with bereaved family members and others; and 5. Supporting bereaved children.

The Japan Support Center for Suicide Countermeasures (JSSC) compiled the “Guidebook for the Comprehensive Support of Those Bereaved” in conformity with the philosophy and basic policies of the nation's suicide countermeasures with the aim of providing the necessary support for those bereaved from a comprehensive perspective.

In compiling this guidebook, JSSC examined what kind of information is needed to comprehensively support the bereaved; how to create a system whereby all the bereaved can obtain the appropriate information in a timely fashion; and how to make this information equally accessible to all. JSSC carried out key informant interviews with administrators who deal with such issues as well as with representatives of private organizations that have had good results in supporting bereaved families, analyzed existing data, etc., and studied them from the perspective of promoting suicide countermeasures in accordance with the General Principles. In addition to the abovementioned stakeholders, JSSC also organized a

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panel of experts, particularly psychiatrists, but also including lawyers and others with the relevant knowledge and experience, and sought a wide range of views from the public and private sectors and academia.

The results showed that some of the information the bereaved need is required immediately after a self-inflicted death occurs, while other types are necessary in the mid to long term. Thus, it became clear that the government and relevant agencies need to provide support so that the bereaved can promptly and accurately get the information they need at the time they need it.

For example, there are many formalities that need to be dealt with at a time when the bereaved are in a state of shock and confusion as a result of the suicide, and these are an enormous burden for them. For that reason, it is important to promptly provide booklets, leaflets, etc. that sum up the information on these procedures in a manner that is easy to understand.

In the mid to long term, it is important to provide information on programs such as the *Wakachiai no Kai* and gatherings for bereaved families as group work sessions and social gatherings where many of those who have lost a loved one can meet and talk about their experiences and listen to those of others. Information also needs to be provided about opportunities for counseling or receiving advice about legal matters; to be more specific, administrative officers in the municipalities may, for example, introduce those families bereaved who require legal support to lawyers, *shiho-shoshi* lawyers (who are qualified to prepare legal documents) and others who are willing to work with them.

In regard to the provision of information to, and equal accessibility of support for, the bereaved, promoting the establishment of a system centered on local support centers for suicide countermeasures will

require coordination among public agencies, private sector groups and private enterprises so that those bereaved can receive the support and information they need wherever they live in Japan.

As for the role of the prefectures, local support centers for suicide countermeasures are expected to carry out training in the appropriate support methods for those engaged in assisting family members and others bereaved; gather the various support information they will need; advise the municipalities on how to provide it; and, when there is a case which is difficult for a municipality to deal with, provide assistance to that municipality in the form of the appropriate advice or guidance, in cooperation with experts as necessary.

The role of the municipalities is to distribute booklets, etc., and provide information on their websites about various procedures, customer support, counseling services, medical care, self-help groups, etc.; they also provide individual counseling, hold *Wakachiai no Kai*, gatherings for bereaved families and other such programs (in collaboration with private agencies) and support the bereaved in rebuilding their lives.

The results of a survey that the JSSC conducted in 2017 on the implementation status of local government projects to support those bereaved are shown in Table 1. The rate of implementation in the form of provision of information to the bereaved, etc., is high at the prefectural level and in designated ordinance cities but low in other municipalities. Moreover, in terms of population size, the implementation rate is high in municipalities with large populations, and low in those with low populations. The ongoing promotion of suicide countermeasures is expected to lead to improvements to the system for providing information and support for those bereaved and the elimination of these regional disparities.

Table 1 Implementation Status of Local Government Projects to Support Those Bereaved (2017)

Support projects	Prefectures / Designated ordinance cities (67)	Municipalities (1473)	Municipalities including designated ordinance cities		
			Fewer than 50,000 (976)	Between 50,000 and 300,000 (434)	More than 300,000 (83)
Provision of information to the bereaved	65 (97.0)	366 (24.8)	206 (21.1)	120 (27.6)	59 (71.1)
Distribution of booklets, etc. (municipal service)	55 (82.1)	266 (18.1)	137 (14.0)	94 (21.7)	53 (63.9)
Website	54 (80.6)	53 (3.6)	12 (1.2)	20 (4.6)	36 (43.4)
Information on counseling	57 (85.1)	195 (13.2)	93 (9.5)	73 (16.8)	46 (55.4)
Information on the activities of self-help groups	46 (68.7)	190 (12.9)	95 (9.7)	69 (15.9)	39 (47.0)
Training of public employees	42 (62.7)	66 (4.5)	32 (3.3)	25 (5.8)	19 (22.9)
Care and counseling support for bereaved children	33 (49.3)	75 (5.1)	53 (5.4)	19 (4.4)	12 (14.5)

( ) indicate percent

(Source: JSSC, "2017 Survey on the Implementation Status of Suicide Countermeasures of Local Government")

**Additional remarks:**

The authors have no reportable conflicts of interest.

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