

# **“Light” and “Sound” to those who are like Helen Keller in Tokyo - Establishment of the “Tokyo Metropolitan Support Center for the Deafblind”**

**Akihide Maeda  
Director  
Tokyo Metropolitan Support  
Center for the Deafblind**

## **Introduction**

“Tokyo Metropolitan Support Center for the Deafblind” was established to support persons with hearing and visual impairment in Taito Ward in Tokyo on Wednesday, May 27, 2009.

This Tokyo Metropolitan support center for persons with hearing and visual impairment is subsidized by the Tokyo Metropolitan government and is operated by specified nonprofit corporation, the "Tokyo Friendship Society of the Deafblind" (Taito Ward, Tokyo, Director: Yasuko Yamagishi). This is the very first local center for the deafblinds that opened with a public subsidy.

## **Who are Deafblinds?**

Deafblinds are those who have impairment in both hearing and vision. It is estimated that there are about 20,000 Deafblinds in Japan, and with about 2,000 residing in Tokyo.

There are many patterns to what is called deafblind: a totally deafblind is one who cannot hear or see a thing; “blind and hard of hearing” are those who cannot see anything and have limited hearing; “deaf and low vision” includes those who cannot hear anything and cannot see very well, etc. Additionally, the ages at which they suffered impairment or in what order their hearing or visual impairments occurred also differ, but the international trend is to refer to all these individuals as “deafblinds.”

If a person without impairment were watching TV and the screen image disappeared while only the sound from the speaker remained, that experience is similar to the recognition world of people who are “blind.” Conversely, if the sound disappears and the screen image remains, that is like the situation “deaf” people are in.

Then what situation is “deafblind”? In this case, it is as if the TV screen is off at the same time the speaker sound is off, so it is like turning off the television set. So the deafblinds are forced to spend an “endless quiet night.”

Since deafblinds live in a condition without “light” or “sound,” they are put in a condition that is extremely difficult or impossible to communicate, collect information, or move about on their own.

This limits those with whom they can communicate, what information they can get is also restricted while their free movement is not permitted, thus putting them into a situation similar to being confined in a prison. It is a condition in which they are incarcerated in invisible “transparent walls.”

Many deafblind people are hoping to get out of such a “prison” ever doing their best and showing true abilities to their surrounding society. They also wish, hope and yearn to lead a meaningful life where they might enjoy studying, working, interacting and living together with others.

## **Establishment of the Tokyo Metropolitan Support Center for the deafblind**

The Tokyo Friendship Society of the Deafblind has been working to support such “feelings” and “wishes” of those deafblinds. It aims to encourage the independence of deafblind persons and to promote their social participation.

As a consequence of establishment of the Disability Services Office at the University of Tokyo by a deafblind person, Mr. Satoshi Fukushima (currently, is a professor at the University of Tokyo Advanced Science and High Technology Research Center) in 1988, a preparatory group consisting of deafblind people, their family members, and volunteers in the Tokyo and surrounding areas was formed. The group developed and carried out various activities, such as holding exchange meetings and publishing a newsletter. Participation gradually grew, and its formal activities as the "Tokyo Friendship Society of the Deafblind" began in 1991. In 2001, it acquired NPO corporate status, and from April 2008 it was accredited as a “Certified NPO corporation” by the National Tax Agency; it continues its activities as a community-based welfare association for the Deafblind.

The Tokyo Friendship Society of the Deafblind conducted an “Interpreter/personal assistant dispatching service program” and an “Interpreter/personal assistant training program” by receiving commissions or subsidies from the Tokyo Metropolitan Government. At the same time and with the financial support of the private sectors the society continued with the “Assistance programs for the deafblind,” including communication workshops, exchange meetings, and circle activities. However, the maintenance of the programs was in a most tenuous situation, as they never knew when there might be a budget cut.

Therefore, the Tokyo Friendship Society of the Deafblind has been lobbying for many years to make such assistance programs Tokyo governmental programs. Dr. Satoshi Fukushima met with Tokyo Governor Ishihara directly, and appealed to him the difficult situation faced by the Deafblind. Subsequently, and with the gratifying support of many other people, the Tokyo Metropolitan Government decided to provide funds to the Tokyo Friendship Society of the Deafblind in the form of the “Deafblind Support Center Project” and authorized the project to begin.

In order to actually implement the “Deafblind Support Center Project,” it was necessary to acquire a larger space, and the society rented a room (approximately 160 square meters) in a building located in Asakusabashi, Taito Ward to establish the “Tokyo Metropolitan Support Center for the Deafblind.”

## **Regarding projects at the Tokyo Metropolitan Support Center for the Deafblind**

At the Tokyo Metropolitan Support Center for the Deafblind, we provide rehabilitation training, that is, skills needed by the deafblind to live independently in the community. The Center also provides other support services, such as exchange activities and various circle activities to encourage their social participation, this since the users might well otherwise merely stay at home. Also, in order to resolve issues, we continuously provide consultation for people who have hearing and visual impairment, their family members, supporters, and

other related organizations. We also develop human resources, those who can provide expert support to the deafblind and who support the daily life of the deafblind person.

[Main projects]

(1) Training project

a. Communication training

Learn about communication methods such as tactile sign language, finger Braille, handwriting letters, as well as reading and writing in Braille.

b. Daily life skills training

Learn about techniques in daily life (how to organize or distinguish between different items of clothing, how to use clocks), housework (cooking, cleaning, knitting, etc.) as well as walking methods that allow for safe movement.

c. PC etc., electronic device utilization training

Learn how to use telephones, fax machines, personal computers utilizing a Braille display, screen enlarging software, screen reading software, and an operating method of a closed circuit TV (CCTV,) among others.

(2) General consultation and support project

Consultation requests regarding daily life issues, how to receive welfare services, etc. from people who are deafblind, their family members, interpreters, personal assistants and related organizations, etc.

(3) Social participation promotion projects

a. Group learning/exchange meetings for the deafblind

Organize the exchange meetings and circle activities within which the deafblind person might comfortably communicate with others.

b. Collect, analyze, provide information related to the deafblind

Collect and analyze information from inside and outside Japan that is related to the deafblind, and provide such information to the users.

c. Educational activities related to the deafblind

Send off information about the deafblind so that the existence of people who are deafblind becomes widely known to the public.

(4) Expert human resource training projects

a. Train support staff and instructors for consultation, training, etc.

Organize training projects to develop human resources who would take part in the consultation or training of people who are deafblind.

b. Development and dissemination for training and study programs

Research and develop a program for the training of human resources who are engaged in training or supporting the deafblind, and provide it to related organizations.

## Conclusion

People who are deafblind have difficulty utilizing established services, which were set up for persons with hearing impairment or those with visual impairment. This due to the fact that the deafblind suffer from both these disabilities – they have been placed within a gap dividing government welfare administrations and are thus left behind in isolation. My fondest hope is that the Tokyo Metropolitan Support Center for the Deafblind serves as a motivation for all those who are deaf and blind, individuals who had been living in despair, been left behind,

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and may now have gotten out of such loneliness and started living a rich, fulfilled, and happy life.

(By Akihide Maeda, Center Director, Tokyo Metropolitan Support Center for the Deafblind)

<Report 10> Study on communication methods for the Deafblind and function of aids based on the daily life needs