



OPINION EXCHANGE MEETING

JET Participant Perspectives on Counseling System Changes

12 December 2014

MIC • MOFA • MEXT • CLAIR • AJET



TABLE OF CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	1
INTRODUCTION	2
METHODOLOGY	2
RESULTS AND DISCUSSION	3
Data Overview	3
Quality of Care Concerns	5
Lack of Regard or Comparable Replacement Support for JETs	5
Contracting Organisations	9
Privacy Issues	12
Cultural Stigma	14
Public Representation Concerns	16
CLAIR/JET Programme Image and Standards Lowered	16
Logistical Concerns	20
Implementation	20
Role of the Prefectural Advisor	21
Inadequacy of the New Subsidy	23
Discrimination Toward Isolated JETs	24
New Problems	24
In Support of the Changes	25
RECOMMENDATIONS	27
CONCLUSION	28

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

During their tenure, many JET Programme participants grapple with mental health issues. This report attempts to gauge the effects of recent changes to the JET support system on their well-being, based on the results of an Association for Japan Exchange and Teaching (AJET) questionnaire distributed to current JET Programme participants.

Formerly, the services that the JET Programme provided through Prefectural Advisors gave accessible support to JETs, both in the everyday troubles of expatriate life as well as in moments of severe emotional trauma. For those who had used this previous system, a sizeable majority (81%) of respondents viewed it positively, with only 4% expressing explicitly negative attitudes toward it.

In contrast, when asked about the recent changes to the support system, an even larger majority (86%) expressed a negative view, while a mere 3% expressed positive impressions.

Critiques of the changes can be categorized into under three main categories of concern: quality of care, public representation, and logistics. A summary of issues under each category is as follows:

1. Quality of Care: lack of an adequate replacement system, loss of morale among JET participants who view the changes as callous, doubts about the suitability of contracting organizations as counseling sources, lack of recourse if the contracting organization itself is the problem, violations of privacy, and the resultant cultural stigma of publicly seeking mental health care.
2. Public Representation: damage to the public perception and image of CLAIR and the JET Programme, declining standards for the JET Programme, and increased turnover rate.
3. Logistics: questionable role of PAs due to these changes, inadequacy of the 10,000 yen subsidy, discrimination toward isolated JETs, and critiques on the method the changes were decided on and made known publicly.

This report concludes with several approaches designed to address the above concerns. AJET believes that it would be beneficial to:

1. reinstate the Prefectural Advisors' capacity to offer listening services to JETs at least temporarily until more comprehensive adjustments can be implemented.
2. develop training programs to provide contracting organizations with the necessary skills and tools to adequately meet the well-being needs of their JET employees and replace the role that Prefectural Advisors filled.
3. maintain accurate and up-to-date information in Japanese and the JET's target language regarding available mental health and counseling services and their proximity to the JET, either at the contracting organization or via the official CLAIR website.
4. introduce a system that holds contracting organizations accountable for guaranteeing the legal rights JETs may have to privacy and objectivity for the purposes of reporting confidential information or workplace violations within Japanese law.
 - A. This system of accountability should include the ability for JETs to anonymously and confidentially report to CLAIR or another supervisory agency through an objective third party regarding how well the contracting organization is meeting the needs of

their well-being.

- B. It should also describe what measures will be taken to support contracting organizations that do not adequately meet JETs' needs, as well as consequences for failing to make improvements toward minimum standards consistently.

INTRODUCTION

The JET Programme has always been renowned for its strong support system. In a memorandum dated July 24, 2014, changes to the support system were announced by the Council of Local Authorities for International Relations (CLAIR). After receiving numerous queries, emails, and concerns from JET participants regarding these changes, the AJET National Council, as the representative body for JET participants, conducted a questionnaire to collect opinions from the community.

METHODOLOGY

The data in this report was collected via a questionnaire conducted by the Association for Japan Exchange and Teaching (AJET) over the period from November 7, 2014 to November 22, 2014. This questionnaire was offered through an anonymous Google Form, and promoted to current JET Programme participants on official AJET online media venues, including the National AJET Facebook page, the 11 National AJET Block pages, and the monthly email newsletter eConnect News.

The questionnaire was conducted in English and consisted of seven questions in three formats: two questions were Yes/No, one was checkbox selection, and four were open-ended. Only the two Yes/No questions were required; all others were optional.

The bulk of the questionnaire relied on an open-ended answer format, chosen to gather firsthand opinions from the JET community without imposing initial interpretive biases. The open-ended format also reduces the probability that respondents may misinterpret the question by focusing on their answers more than their understanding of the question or supplied answer choices. This allows the report analysis team, as well as other readers, to interact with the most unadulterated data possible. Much of this resulting input is incorporated in the qualitative analysis sections of "Results and Discussion."

AJET report writers evaluated each open-ended response and sorted them into three categories of general attitude to represent survey input quantitatively. Definitions for each category are as follows:

Positive	The respondent viewed the item in question as generally favorable and/or useful for JET participants
Negative	The respondent viewed the item in question as generally detrimental and/or not useful for JET participants
Ambivalent	The respondent expressed neutral, nonchalant, or conflicting attitudes toward the item in question

Throughout this report, the following abbreviations will be used for common terms in relation to the JET Programme:

AJET: The Association for Japan Exchange and Teaching

ALT: Assistant Language Teacher

CLAIR: Council of Local Authorities for International Relations

CIR: Coordinator for International Relations

CO: Contracting Organization

JET: Japan Exchange and Teaching (Programme)

JETs: Japan Exchange and Teaching Programme participants

PA: Prefectural Advisor

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The common theme in the feedback was one of deep concern. This section will first gauge this overall opinion with quantitative analysis, before focusing on specific subjects of concern qualitatively. For the purposes of this report, survey percentages have been rounded to the nearest whole number.

In order to directly present what was said by JET participants in the questionnaire, large amounts of quotations from the responses will be included under the relevant headings. For clarity, report text summarizing the responses will be normally aligned, while block quotations will be indented.

Data Overview

In the half-month period that the questionnaire was open, 163 responses were recorded. This section will give an overview of the responses for each of the seven prompts posed by the questionnaire.

The first question asked if respondents had partaken in counseling services from the PAs under the previous system. While many had not, a sizeable minority (29%) had sought out help, as can be seen in the figure below. Additionally, as will be discussed in following sections, those who had not often expressed that their decisions may not have been driven by a lack of need, but rather pre-existing doubts as to the efficacy or privacy they would receive.

1. Have you ever used the counseling services provided by the PAs (Prefectural Advisors)?		
No, I haven't.	116	71%
Yes, I have.	47	29%
Total	163	100%

The second question solicited opinions from the people who had used the previous counseling services. Of 47 respondents who had consulted PAs, a substantial majority (81%) indicated positive feedback. JET participants expressed how PA counseling was “fair, competent, balanced and approachable”, with some even calling it “essential”; many mentioned how it was “invaluable” to have a confidential source of support from a peer who has gone through similar experiences. Several respondents mentioned how first-year JETs (presumably in their area) were given compulsory counseling or had a required video conference, all of which were valuable.

In the workplace, JET respondents remarked on how PAs gave “new perspective and insight into how [their] Japanese colleagues could be feeling and how to approach tense situations at work better.” Numerous instances of workplace issues, such as with particular JTEs or entire schools, were eased toward a resolution by PA advice.

2. If you HAVE, what did you think of their services?		
Attitude	Responses	Percentage
Positive	38	81%
Ambivalent	7	15%
Negative	2	4%
Total	47	100%

During times of crisis, PAs were also cited as “incredibly helpful”. Many respondents relayed instances of culture shock or emotional stress (such as the death of a loved one, or sexual orientation issues) where JET participants found relief and support from a PA. PA support included helping “find English speaking doctors/resources and provid[ing] confidential advice.” Even simply being an understanding listener was more than enough to make JET participants “calmer and able to approach the situation with a level head” after talking, just because each “could express [his/her] initial negative reaction to the situation without worrying about upsetting [his/her] colleagues.”

That being said, respondents were clear to point out that they realized that PAs were not professionals, but still found it acceptable because PAs were not providing medical advice. Many in the Ambivalent category acknowledged the limitations of PAs as being restricted to listening, but some likewise reiterated that while PAs “didn’t really help [them] with [their] issue[s]”, they were still “glad the service was there.” Others remarked that the PA resources were “about on par with the PSG”, referencing the Peer Support Group listening and referral system supported by AJET. The two Negative responses included one instance of unprofessional breach of confidentiality on the part of a PA, and another that concluded it was a “waste of time.”

The third question asked if respondents knew about the changes in the CLAIR counseling system before they had taken this survey. While a large majority (89%) had, it is worrying that 11% of respondents had not heard of them by November, despite the original memorandum from CLAIR being dated as several months earlier in July.

3. Have you heard about the changes to the CLAIR Counseling System for JETs?		
No, I haven’t.	18	11%
Yes, I have.	145	89%
Total	163	100%

The follow-up question asked the source of information for those 145 who had learned of the changes previously. Respondents were allowed to select more than one option. The results are sorted and presented in the table below.

The vast majority of JET participants learned of the changes through their PAs (79%), followed by hearing from other JETs (29%), suggesting that the PA system is the most wide-reaching method of disseminating information. A minority of 27% were notified via the memorandum issued by CLAIR, and only 8% heard through their CO, indicating that those channels were much less used and comparatively less reliable.

4. If you HAVE, what was the source of your information?		
Source	Responses	Percentage
Prefectural Advisors	115	79%
From Other JETs	42	29%
CLAIR Memo	39	27%
National AJET	35	24%
Prefectural AJET	22	15%
Board of Education	11	8%
Other	10	7%
AJET Peer Support Group	4	3%

The fifth and sixth open-ended questions solicited opinions about the new changes to the counseling system. Of the 163 respondents, 152 submitted substantial opinions which were sorted as follows:

5. If you HAVE, what do you think of the changes? 6. If you HAVEN'T, please take the time to read over this quick summary, and give your opinion!		
Attitude	Responses	Percentage
Positive	5	3%
Ambivalent	16	11%
Negative	131	86%
Total	152	100%

Of the JET participants that did not feel negatively about the changes, more had ambivalent attitudes than were actually supportive. An overwhelming majority (86%) thought negatively of them. The results of questions 5 and 6 will be investigated in the following sections.

Question 7 asked for respondents' emails, in case anonymous respondents needed to be reached for clarification; input from that prompt remains confidential and will not be published.

Quality of Care Concerns

Lack of Regard or Comparable Replacement Support for JETs

Many JETs have difficulties adjusting to a new culture, workplace problems, and other pre-existing or new issues. A widely voiced concern was that CLAIR is disregarding these issues. Many JET Participants felt that there is not only a lack of understanding by CLAIR of the unique challenges and hardships that JET participants face in Japan, but also a lack of regard for any challenges that they may be facing. These challenges vary from mental and emotional struggles, culture shock, to problems in the workplace. JET participants noted that even the mentally strongest JET participants can develop problems and require services. Several respondents commented that the lack of support for its participants means the JET Programme no longer differentiates itself from private company competitors, and expresses concerns toward plans to further expand the JET

Programme in its current state. Many JET participants felt the changes were a bureaucratic move to cut costs, cut responsibility and standardise processes.

Lack of Care for JETs

Many respondents felt the changes represented a particular lack of regard for the concerns and particular situations of JET Programme participants.

One aspect highlighted by respondents was a concern that JETs would be marginalised based on their location. This concern focused on the fact that JETs would “need to travel great distances” to find support like that previously offered through the PA system. Indeed, many noted that in these areas there was a lack of English counseling services available to them. In addition, JETs with sufficient Japanese ability noted that, despite their ability to communicate with Japanese-speaking counselors, they remained hesitant to discuss key issues. Many JETs feared negative judgment, or a lack of empathy and understanding for problems due to cultural differences. The fact that for JETs in rural areas had small, even non-existent peer-to-peer support networks was also raised by respondents.

This concern was not limited to respondents based in rural areas. JETs living in urban areas also noted a lack of English counseling services and a worry that the cost of any services not covered by Japanese medical insurance would be prohibitive to JETs actually utilising them, in spite of the financial compensation arrangements that have been introduced by CLAIR.

The concerns of both rural and urban JETs are summed up by the following quote:

“The changes simply put in hurdles for JETs to receive support without offering even an comparable alternative. While yes the stipend is now there, if we wish to take advantage of its pitiful compensation, many rural areas do not have English speaking mental health professionals. Essentially, JETs have been left high and dry in terms of options for seeking counseling”

Additional responses included:

“It’s hypocritical in my opinion. You want good cultural ambassadors and teachers but are only willing to provide very little support for their mental well-being while they are trying to adjust to a foreign environment. It should also be noted that sometimes we are thrown into hostile environments. Not everyone wants to work with a foreigner and some make that abundantly clear by creating a hostile work environment. The feelings of isolation can be severely dangerous to an individual and easy access to a mental health advisor is critical. It can make the difference between successful or unsuccessful employee, and that goes for both Japanese and foreign worker.”

“...severe lack of regard for and support of JETs and the very real mental and emotional struggles that JETs face as foreign residents agreeing to come to Japan to further Japan’s goals of internationalization and English language learning.”

“...an overt and distasteful disregard for the difficulties and hardships”

“JET had problems with suicides of members in the past and I feel these changes are a step backwards, towards that again.”

“We were told that the changes were made in order to deepen and strengthen the bond between participants and their respective COs. However, I do not believe that the changes will make any difference in my relationship (or lack thereof) with my supervisor. The changes made it sound as if participants were deprived of a plan B if contact and/or communication with their CO were to

fail or turn badly.”

“It feels as though CLAIR is slashing a lot of beneficial programs with very little regard for the employees of the JET Programme. It seems laughable that CLAIR would continue to increase numbers of participants in the JET Programme every year while failing to provide resources that help JETs in times of personal struggle and crisis.”

“...CLAIR does not understand the situations that JETs are in and doesn't care about their well-being. It is preposterous to think that a JET is going to go to his/her employer about counseling issues especially given the language barrier let alone the stigma and risk of retribution. An independent third party or ombudsman is needed for these situations. CLAIR can count on more broken contracts and sadly more mental health issues, but then what do they care as long as they and the COs are saving money and covering their liabilities? What differentiates JET from Interac now?”

“...the idea that CLAIR or the ministries feel it acceptable to reduce their support this much is decidedly disrespectful of the realities of the potential challenges JET participants may face.”

“These changes seem purely bureaucratic in nature, meant to further solidify the process rather than actually help JETs.”

“People in charge choose to remain fecklessly ignorant about the challenges and struggles of living in an entirely different cultural context.”

“don't solve the problem but defer it to our BOE or CO to expose the JETs to further difficulties.”

*“An employer cutting counseling options for people who are undergoing severe life changes that are created and necessitated *by their job*, and then also putting them in the position of having to beg their employer to fund part of the counseling in a country with a severe stigma against: emotional suffering, mental illness, so much as discussing problems in your workplace, and asking for help? This WILL lead to horrible problems. It is not a question of “if”, it is a guarantee.”*

“A terrible idea which could even lead to people dying. Emotional stress is not something to trifle with, and taking away people's options for dealing with such is a damn dangerous game. Talk about going out of your way to prove to your employees that saving money matters more than their wellbeing.”

“The changes to PA mediation and JET mental health practices are unrealistic and, frankly, insulting.”

“At best, this seems to be an attempt to remove a support structure from vulnerable stakeholders (JETs) and push the responsibility for any problems into their laps or under a convenient rug where it can be dismissed. I imagine any statistics currently kept will be much lower after these changes, as JETs have no access to help.”

“The changes amount to nothing less than a callow and ham-fisted attempt at cutting program costs while reaffirming contracting organizations' already extensive control over ALTs. By removing the official ability of PAs and CLAIR to negotiate and intervene in situations where miscommunication and abuse from COs harm JETs, as well as to provide serious and meaningful mental health care, CLAIR has intentionally cut a last, essential line of defense for JETs in distress. The CLAIR email, a masterpiece of passive-aggression, says, in so many fine words “Like it or lump it, gaijin. The COs own you”. This is unconscionable.”

“Anytime a major international exchange organization decides to suspend all (or most) mental health support services, it smacks of total incompetence at best, gross negligence at worst.”

“This is so incredibly counter-intuitive. More than that, it’s reckless and irresponsible. There is now NO JET Counseling Support System...just like when JET started. I wonder how CLAIR will respond when the number of mid-contract drop-outs, the number of cases related to mental health, the number of suicides return to the levels that prompted the creation of the support system in the first place?”

“Essentially it looks like CLAIR decided people’s mental health wasn’t worth the money.”

Lack of Replacement Support

Some JETs spoke in understanding of CLAIR’s best intentions in the recent changes to the counseling system, but were disappointed in the manner at which the changes were carried out as well as the lack of replacement to support its participants. Combined with the absence of a Human Resources department for the JET Programme, there is concern that JET participants are now truly alone. JETs acknowledged that there are a number of resources available in Japan which are not affiliated with the JET Programme, but commented that these support resources would not be as personal and understanding as the PAs.

“I called the Tokyo Life Line once to see if there was some place left but [got] the most generic of replies”

“the nature of the changes and the lack of any proper replacement is very shocking coming from a program as highly regarded as JET. The old system was already poorly advertised and not accurately described or shared, but this new system is absolutely ridiculous.”

“I’m glad to hear PAs don’t have counseling duties anymore, since a couple days of training doesn’t make them great counselors. But it doesn’t sound like they’ve replaced it with anything. Are JETs supposed to find counseling in their area? What if they’re in rural areas with no English-language counseling? Will JETs be told about national helplines at Orientation? Also, are JETs supposed to contact their contracting organizations about mental health problems? That feels like a breach of privacy that most people won’t risk. In summary, I think it’s good that they removed the current system, but I don’t understand what that has been replaced with or how it’s better for JETs. I think the changes encourage JETs to be proactive and more self reliant, and seek to work out their problems with their supervisors/contracting organizations directly instead of gossiping or running around behind their backs. That being said, it’s a pretty serious (so much so that it’s comical) breach of privacy to have to divulge to your CO something so personal as your reasons for seeking counseling help.”

“I understand the reasons given by CLAIR as to why they made these changes. However, I wished that they’d have come up with a better alternative before implementing the changes, because I feel like this is a huge step back.”

“I had to source an English speaking psychiatrist on my own which was EXTREMELY hard as I cannot speak Japanese and mental health resources for foreigners are limited outside Tokyo and Osaka. Finding access to mental health services has by far been the most stressful thing for me since arriving here.”

“While I do believe that CLAIR had the best intentions in making these changes, I believe they were poorly thought out, and sloppily implemented. I agree that the CO should take a more active role in providing living support for their JETs. But, an alternate to the counseling system should be

proposed that is easier to access than the current “find a mental health professional and send us the receipt and we will throw some change your way” approach that was implemented.”

“I think CLAIR is unaware of how many serious issues occur and are experienced by JETs, for example, sexual harassment, intimidation, stalking, depression, overworking, etc. etc. I don't feel that these type of situations are adequately covered and protected under the new support system. If an ALT has a problem with their supervisor, who can they turn to for support? If an ALT has been sexually harassed in the same workplace where their supervisor works, how can they bring up an already sensitive issue without feeling embarrassed or without the fear of coworker comments? If someone is depressed, who can they turn to? I know many people do not want to call PSG for fear that they will end up talking to someone they know or someone who many know someone they know. Who can these people turn to then? CLAIR has not provided us PAs with any information regarding alternative counseling options we can refer ALTs to.”

“It is extremely irresponsible for CLAIR to refuse to allow PAs to get involved in certain situations in the host prefecture/city. For ALTs and CIRs, there are no functioning HR departments available to file work place issues, especially with co-workers and supervisors. JETs are therefore in a vulnerable position to begin with. With the support of the PA, at least there is a second opinion that could be contributing to the ease of tension. However, the new system directs JETs to the people who they may have problems with. This is extremely bizarre in terms of asset management as many JETs will be put in very awkward and dis-functioning environments. Not every contracting organization and personnel in charge will provide sufficient support for JETs with problems, and this move will likely increase the tension between current and future JETs and their contracting organizations.”

“However this is a typical Japanese change to a system that I felt was perfectly functional. Make it so impossible to effect change that no one will attempt to do so. I am extremely disappointed not only by these changes but by the thought process behind them. Create a system where you place inexperienced 20-30 year olds and then force them to acclimate to a radically different culture with little safety net and no one to turn to for advice. These changes have created a spiderweb of cultural and language barriers that seem impossible to overcome.”

“It seems like these recent changes by CLAIR will prevent people from being able to make use of counseling services in the situations where they are most needed. CLAIR can encourage JETs to resolve issues through their CO without taking away the support network and the basic right to privacy that is needed when such a resolution isn't possible.”

Contracting Organisations

Lack of Understanding and Resources

Many JETs are concerned by the capacity of COs to offer help due to a lack of mutual cultural understanding. Grave concerns were raised for JET participants who identify as LGBT. JET participants cannot optimistically expect their Japanese employers to view their issues in the same light as themselves and would be reluctant to speak to supervisors about their issues.

Some respondents noted that while PAs were not equipped to answer all questions from JET participants, COs are in the same position, thereby making that objection irrelevant. Numerous JETs queried whether Contracting Organisations, who have now taken over the roles previously performed by PAs, will have at least the same amount of training PAs previously did in counseling and referral. Overall, JET respondents felt that shifting the responsibility from PAs to COs will not solve any problems and can instead create many new ones.

“There is not enough cultural understanding in Japan yet and it is not in individual JET’s responsibilities to make COs understand foreigners and gay people. That is just too much.”

“If you can’t talk to a person with a similar cultural background, who will listen, and have understanding in what it feels like being an expat in Japan (an eternal outsider) as well as cultural understanding about gay people, I think there will be an increase in suicides. The closet is a really hard place to live.”

“The changes put too much responsibility on supervisors who are ill-equipped to deal with it.”

“Teachers are teachers and given that most of them have never spent ANY time outside of Japan, let alone in an English-speaking country, how can they possibly provide adequate assistance to JETs?”

“I feel that CLAIR’s policy puts the onus of initiating and maintaining communication on JETs, many of whom cannot speak Japanese or are unfamiliar with the culture, while COs are not given any support or instruction in how to improve communication on their end.”

“Do our Contracting Organisations receive any training to help us with mental health issues, like the Prefectural Advisors did? If I went to my Board of Education and told them I was depressed and struggling, would they be able to deal with me? I don’t think so. And maybe some issues might have been too much for the PAs to handle, but I feel like they were a lot more capable of dealing with this sort of thing than our Contracting Organisations.”

“I do have some sympathy in a situation where a serious mental health issue would place a burden upon the PA fig example but I fail to see how placing that burden upon the CO (who presumably has less training, less fluent language skills and possibly less interest) in supporting the JET and referring them on to appropriate sources of help and support.”

“In my situation, my ALT supervisor, who is the person I will be relying on under this new system, is very slow to respond to emails, has not been reliable in the past, and has never been to a foreign country in his life. I do not have anything against him, but he is not equipped to take on this responsibility, specifically in the realm of soft skills (understanding, listening, selflessness, making time for people, taking care of people that are under his care).”

“It is absurd to ask JETs to rely so heavily on their contracting organizations when many ALTs don’t speak proficient Japanese (and many COs don’t employ fluent English speakers). There is also an issue of a cultural barrier; some issues that are important or distressing to JETs may not seem so pressing to their Japanese employers. Personally, at my contracting organization I do not feel like I am even on my supervisor’s radar, and I know that many JETs in my area feel a similar lack of support. I would not feel comfortable talking with my CO about a work issue like sexual harassment or health issues, physical or mental.”

“Misunderstanding and stigmatization of mental illness is prevalent in many of our home countries, but in most cases these problems are even more serious in Japan. What with the constant personnel changes in the Japanese workplace, even if a JPA or staff member at the CO does handle mental health issues sensitively, that person will be transferred away within 3 years. It has never been likely for a CO to be understanding or sensitive toward mental health issues, especially ones “serious enough” to merit seeing a counselor, for non-Japanese employees, considering the issues of Japanese employees themselves are already swept under the rug. There is no anonymity, only feelings of vulnerability. While this subsidy is a nice gesture from CLAIR, I imagine most JETs will not take advantage of it.”

Direct Issues

Ideally, all JET participants would have a happy working relationship with their Contracting Organisations. Realistically, this is unfortunately not the case. Many JETs feel that the changes alienate JETs who have conflicts or issues with their COs. Although these are understandably not problems that can be solved by CLAIR, PAs had been a neutral party that facilitated communications between JETs that struggled with disagreements regarding COs. Many JET participants reported having COs that simply do not wish to cooperate with them. One response remarked that having to go through COs to reach PA assistance was “akin to asking your abuser if it is okay to call the police on them.” Although this is clearly a less than ideal situation, it is unfortunately one that many JET participants face in their various placements across Japan. Especially for JETs that cannot fluently communicate in Japanese, PAs are a valuable mediator for making JET participants’ work environments more manageable.

Additionally, many JET respondents raised concerns to the response of COs should they try to seek help. Several respondents expressed fear of being reprimanded, or even fired, and stated they would rather stay silent than put their job at risk.

“How is it useful to ask our contracting organization for permission to seek advice or mediation from the PA in cases where the dispute is within the contracting organization? What incentive do they have to agree if they are trying to go against our contracts or exploit us? And in the case of the mental health allowance, it’s even worse. Not only is \$100 a paltry amount (I would be less offended if they offered nothing), it requires the JET to be public about their mental health needs with their employer and direct supervisor. Considering the stigma against mental health in Japan and the fear of being fired, who would they want to do that for only \$100? Are they trying to discourage us from seeking financial help with mental health problems by making the risk outweigh the benefit?”

“There are no protections for JETs who want to take advantage of services. I have heard of JETs being let go in the middle of their contracts for seeking help. It seems like the whole system is designed to discourage JETs from getting help they need that would greatly improve their experiences and relationships with schools or others the JET interacts with.”

“The reason almost anyone contacts the PA is because they are being treated poorly, sometimes even in a racist manner, by their contracting organization. Being told to contact the organization that is mistreating you before seeking help is akin to asking your abuser if it is okay to call the police on them. CLAIR’s actions over the past 2 years have been disgusting.”

“In the case of mental health issues the expectation that JETs are supposed to go to their COs before coming to PAs is especially dangerous; for many JETs, even those working for more communicative COs, they would rather speak to no one at all than take what they consider an extremely personal issue into a work setting, and (as they might believe) potentially putting their job at risk.”

“It is nearly unimaginable to have to reveal that sort of intensely private information to a superior who is in charge of our hiring and firing in order to receive help...will cause JETs to avoid seeking mental help and will do much more harm than good.”

“Schools do not wish to have a bad reputation or expend significant energy to deal with problems, and instead sweep serious issues under the rug.”

“I recently had a concern with my school regarding a teacher and was turned aside and told to handle the situation myself. Despite having attempted to already do so. I was and am in need of another voice in my quest for mutual understanding at my school. Now I have no one to help me or give advice. Therefore my situation stagnates with no strong voice to make a decision.”

“I also think that this change Jury-rigs the system into one in which the JETs can be more easily taken advantage of by their CO’s. If a JET is having an issue and first approaches a CO, if the CO feels it is too bothersome or uncomfortable to deal with, the JET might be brushed off, given evasive answers, or even [given] false ones. The PA system as it was acted as a system of advocacy for the JETs, who a lot of the time are alone in an incredibly foreign work environment facing different expectations, a different language, and a different method of accomplishing things. Having another JET in a time of crisis or when a problem arises is immensely comforting as then you are no longer standing alone versus the entire system.”

“In the past year alone, such stress-inducing conflicts and struggles have included, for example, challenges posed by lazy or uncollaborative coworkers (coworker in question has since been [as] reprimanded as possible given their position). In other cases, ALTs are given responsibilities and demands are made of them by the contracting organization that don’t line up with the JET participant’s understanding of their job nor with what their contract states (extreme overtime including 4 Saturdays per month with no daikyuu options, working until 8pm 5 days a week , regularly being told to teach classes alone rather than team teaching , etc.). In other cases, conflicts have been smaller, but due to communication or language barriers, the conflicts have been hard to resolve (not every supervisor is fluent, nor might they want to put their necks on the line when there are potentially school politics involved).”

“Like any reputable company or organization, a HR representative or team is available to discuss and resolve issues between different individuals in a workplace. By taking PAs out, the equivocal [sic] HR neutral body is taken out.”

“Under the new changes, if a JET is having issues with a CO, they have essentially been cut out from any way of changing or resolving issues if their CO is unavailable or uncooperative.”

“Why require JETs to contact their Supervisors before their PAs instead of empowering PAs to say no or forward them to other sources? The changes fail to address this basic question: what if the supervisor is the problem? If the CO is the source of the problem or the miscommunication, or the supervisor is busy or forgetful, or if the supervisor doesn’t know what to do, what should the JET do?”

“People go to the PAs for help in dealing with communication or other issues with their COs, not instead of their COs.”

“...obvious conflict of interest created by making COs responsible for counseling JETs or helping them out. What if the JETs problem is with their relationship with the CO and need advice? What if the CO is unwilling or unable to help the JET out?”

“...in my experience as PA I have dealt with some COs who either cannot communicate with their JETs due to a language or cultural barrier, or simply refuse to do so. Despite what CLAIR may believe, I have seen first-hand that not all COs consider working with their JETs a priority.”

“Many supervisors do not take ALT complaints seriously - especially if part or all of the issue is due to miscommunication or mistreatment on the school’s side.”

Privacy Issues

The most commonly voiced concern by the JET participants was the lack of privacy. JET participants need to be sure their counseling options through a CO occur in a safe environment. Although it is true that this issue is indicative of cultural norms that may differ between host countries and Japan, in this case it is important

to acknowledge that privacy is not as much of a cultural issue as it is a legal and employment issue. Japanese law states that employees are entitled to confidentially report issues such as, but not limited to, harassment. However, due to the constraints of the new approach, that confidentiality is impossible to guarantee. Thus, many JETs stated they are uncomfortable bringing serious personal, mental, or health issues to their COs. Several JETs balked at the idea of bringing their most intimate problems to the people that hired them. Similarly, many JETs also noted issues with the need to go through the CO to obtain the subsidy provided by CLAIR.

Many JETs voiced that having to go through Contracting Organisations equates to lack of privacy and are worried about the stigma that exists in Japan regarding mental health issues. Many respondents mentioned that privacy in Japan is not the same as in their home countries, and that information about them will generally spread with or without their permission. The detrimentally dissuasive power of reality to JETs seeking the help cannot be dismissed. Concerns were raised that this would in turn lead to further distancing in relationships between the JET participant and their Contracting Organisation, rather than bringing them closer together as the changes are proposed to do.

Major concerns were raised for JET participants that identify as LGBT, and those who have suffered sexual harassment. JET participants cannot optimistically expect that Contracting Organisations will always respond in a positive manner to issues they may have.

“Having to wear that scarlet letter [as a result of using the reimbursement program] at my schools has been the most humiliating thing. There’s no privacy and there’s so much behind it my Japanese coworkers can’t understand... I deeply worry if I’ve made it worse and ruined my relationships with my schools... I feel exposed and open to speculation and more misunderstanding and that doubt will never go away... [The changes] didn’t think to protect the ALTs, but [instead] the liability and responsibility of CLAIR.”

“If I were to tell my supervisor that I was having troubles with depression or something along those lines they would treat me differently. I am already an outsider who is treated differently in the workplace so to go and then encourage this is just insanity. I would never approach my supervisor with my issues no matter how bad because this would impact my workplace relationships.”

“Absolutely ludicrous. How is it that every other teacher or government worker in Japan is allowed to have privacy, but we’re not?”

“Now that there’s no privacy, people will be less likely to seek help if something is wrong. Japan can be an extremely isolating place, and you’ve just succeeded in making it even more so.”

“...very short-sighted and leave a lot of JETS open to risks. Without the promise of confidentiality and protection they will be less inclined to engage in support it the first place. Not to mention forcing JETS to speak to their school first before they are even allowed to contact an outside source, especially if a JET has an issue with their school that they wish to simply seek external advice on seems deeply ill-thought.

“...to have a safe place to talk about anything you might need to talk about, anytime you might need to talk about it... The changes remove that safety by making you go through professional lines for something that is private. These changes will drive JETS, CLAIR, and Contracting Organizations further apart, not closer together.”

“...issues like sexual harassment where the JET might not feel safe speaking to the BoE directly.”

“...a problem with the trans and or LGBT community, where in Japan there is no active anti-discrimination laws in employment. So if a trans person has gender dysphoria, they would

essentially have to tell their Contracting Organisation they are trans.”

“Being forced to submit paperwork through the CO for re-compensation for counseling seems to be the best way to keep those who most need mental support from seeking it. Generally the last thing a person seeking mental support wants is for their workplace and coworkers to learn of their mental health situation. Particularly in a country like Japan, where (particularly in more rural regions) mental health is still largely frowned upon.”

“...after I was sexually assaulted, I knew I needed to see a therapist, but I did not want to discuss this issue with my male boss because it was highly personal and something I wanted to keep quiet. I didn't want my small town to know. At that time, the PAs were able to refer me to a therapist. If I had had to go to my supervisor, it would have added another layer of worry and trauma to an already incredibly traumatic experience.”

“for non-work related issues, many JETs may wish for their own privacy to keep their problems from COs. It's not their business if it's not work related, anyway. Also, COs are not trained in counseling.”

“One of the main reasons for having this service is to address issues that require confidentiality and independence from the school system. What if someone is suffering from sexual harassment in the workplace for example? They may not be able to request any necessary counseling without the perpetrator finding out before the complaint becomes official, or without putting another work colleague in an extremely awkward position.”

“I would much rather talk to a PA if I had any problems because they understand that in Western countries we like to keep certain things private- if I had a problem and I told my Contracting Organisation, suddenly everyone would know about it, as per Japanese workplace culture. I don't want that to happen. One of the JETs in my city was sick and he went to the BoE for help, and then at the monthly meeting one of the women from the BoE who is in charge of looking after us proceeded to tell all the ALTs in my city about this guy and how his illness had been treated. I just don't think that's acceptable. It's none of our business. It really put me off going to my BoE with any problems because I feel like they'll just tell everybody.”

“One key difference is that if a foreigner shares a struggle with the CO, this information will be dispensed to all of their coworkers, and everyone will begin to offer advice on how to fix their problems. This is a very Japanese way of dealing with problems. At least for me as an American, I purposefully seek out the people I think can give me good advice, and ask them for help. If I don't want someone to know about my struggle, I don't tell them, regardless if they are my coworker or not. Maybe this is a difference between our cultures, but I think there is also a difference in the way the CO and PA systems actually carry out counseling.”

Cultural Stigma

Many respondents noted that a combination of many factors will deter numerous JET participants from seeking help when needed, including lack of privacy, lack of confidence, and not wanting to seek professional help to make a big deal out of what may initially be a “trivial” issue (but can compound into a serious one). This is a concern especially when an initial minor problem that could have been quickly fixed escalates into something life-threatening, and can unfortunately be too late to then address.

Another strong factor affecting JET participants' will to seek help is the stigma on mental health problems in Japan. Many respondents noted that even if they wanted to seek help, they would refrain from doing so in any

way that would involve a workplace colleague or CO knowing. There were two main concerns raised. Firstly, JET participants wished to avoid awkward situations in their workplaces. Secondly, many respondents were concerned that COs would use this against them in the next recontracting phase. While this may be inaccurate, or even seem absurd, it is a very real concern that JETs are faced with. JET participants felt that forcing them to go through COs before getting help is simply an indirect way of deterring them from any help at all.

“I wonder how many other ALTs won’t get the help they need and I wonder how easy it will be for the Jet Program to sweep them under the rug too. It is not easy living as a foreigner in Japan.”

“Having a more casual first option, that of a PA who has some basic training, is more comforting and valuable to someone who is going through difficulties, than hot potato-ing them off to a third party- further, people tend to self-assess their problems as ‘not important’- and important enough for third party professional help is a WHOLE LOT more important than important enough to book in a chat with the PA. That increase in perceived troublesomeness will make people more inclined to keep their problems to themselves.

“But a PA with basic training is relaxed enough to go to with problems that aren’t ‘I’m slitting my wrists’, and that bit of training can really boost a person’s confidence in their PA.”

“Getting counseling is not well seen in Japan. There’s still a lot of prejudice against it and forcing us to talk to our CO first is like saying “don’t try to get help”.

“I was utterly shocked and disappointed with how the counseling has changed. I hope someone realizes this is not a good idea and the potential disastrous effects this can have.”

“This seemed like [a] Japanese move since they do not encourage people to seek counseling and instead tell them to internalize problems and ganman!”

“This is a work culture where people don’t discuss their problems, take holiday instead of sick pay, and paternity leave is on offer but if you take it you become a local celebrity for all the wrong reasons. My medical report, for example, was supposed to be private, but was openly discussed by teachers in the staff room. Does CLAIR honestly expect it’s in the best interests of ALTs to report what will be perceived as a ‘mental problem’ to their employer? Councelling is a great service, sometimes councillors just listen, and sometimes people just need to talk. This is going to stop people going to councillors, and I hate to say it, but that’s how it looks like it was designed. They’ve closed down a good service here and winters coming. Bottom line, councillors listen to people’s problems no matter how big or small. A small worry can stop turning into a big one, sometimes councillors stop people killing themselves.”

“I feel that it could potentially leave loopholes for schools and BOE’s to dismiss their ALT’s because of bias and/or seeking help will be at a tremendous expense to the ALT, or even worse the ALT will just seek no help.”

“These changes will not “transfer” JET participants’ issues onto the COs, but just isolate JETs further and I fear many will be afraid to seek the help or assistance they require.”

“...to go to their superior and ask to receive the stipend is ridiculous and insulting considering the stigma of mental health problems in Japan.”

“There is such a cultural stigma against mental illness in Japan already, does CLAIR really think this will be taken up by JETs at all?”

“With the social stigma and cost in Japan of mental health JET’s are unlikely to be able to afford counseling independently, but can’t necessarily inform their workplace as suggested for a subsidy.”

Public Representation Concerns

CLAIR/JET Programme Image and Standards Lowered

As a result of the reactions discussed so far, JETs who responded have expressed that CLAIR’s decision to move forward authoritatively, arbitrarily, and hastily cast a negative image on their organization and have damaged JETs’ belief in the good intentions of the JET Programme. A collection of frustrations combined to paint an image of declining standards and a decrease in regard for JETs once they had entered the program. JETs further commented that these perceptions may lead the international community to build a more detrimental general image of how JETs are treated in Japan, which could dissuade future applicants as they seek recommendations from current JETs and alumni online through social media or editorials. Furthermore, it could accelerate the attrition rate of current JETs, making it more difficult to achieve the increases in overall ALTs in Japan before 2020, which has been previously espoused by the government.

“While the previous counseling options weren’t great and the advice from CLAIR poor or lacking, not having someone available in person for each ken is quite a worry. What JETs really need is a true councilor, properly trained and with better legal protection. My PA and myself have tried to help another jet this year with severe depression and the previous system just didn’t work. The PA (and myself) found it incredibly difficult to help and all advice from CLAIR was “the JET should see a professional or go home”. Getting the JET to see a professional was easier said than done and sending them home is not solving their problem just stopping them being CLAIR’s. I am glad that this responsibility has been taken off the PAs as it is too much for them but a proper answer should be in place not just what is basically a small bandage over a gaping wound.”

“Beyond just the changes, I want to say that the entire way this was dealt with was horrendous. These changes went into place WELL BEFORE we were informed of them, meaning that FOR MONTHS people were operating on the illusion of privacy. I found out unofficially and immediately warned others. And when these changes were finally addressed in an official capacity we were told that the system was originally developed because so many JETs were breaking contract. This is true, many early JETs did break contract--by committing suicide! Nice euphemism there, CLAIR, and way to show you care about the people you’re bringing into this country.”

Lowers Standards of the JET Program

Many JETs commented about the original establishment of the counseling system for the JET Programme. It was noted repeatedly that the services were first introduced to assist JET participants that were having serious issues living abroad. While many JET participants acknowledged that the previous system was by no means perfect and had its own problems, they were also grateful to know something existed as a safety net in times of need. JET participants noted that in addition to affecting the Programme internally, the public international image of the Programme, which has the aim of promoting internationalisation and grassroots exchange, would also suffer as a consequence.

Every year, struggling JETs leave Japan because of the problems they face. Regardless, the history of the program credits CLAIR and the JET Programme, showing evidence of high satisfaction as demonstrated by prolonged recontracting by current JETs, as well as the decision to raise contract limits from three to five years due to popular demand. Additionally, the JET Programme has always been renowned for its outstanding support system, in comparison to its competitors.

If anything that support system will become even more necessary with the government's plan to hire more and more JETs over the next few years. More people means that more support will be necessary to ensure that their well-being is taken into consideration.

Numerous JET participants feel the new changes make the JET Program less supportive or prestigious; are signs of disconnect and neglect of the participants it brings to Japan; and noted that a very integral part of the program which made it stand out from others has been removed. Overall, many respondents felt that the JET Programme has taken several steps backwards.

“The counseling services in JET were established for a reason: because JETs were having serious issues and needed assistance. Living in Japan brings a lot of loneliness, isolation, culture shock, and sometimes people need assistance. Everyone also comes to Japan with a past, and may need to work through some of those issues while in Japan. I think the CLAIR is going to see some negative effects on the program due to these changes.”

“Horrible. If I understand correctly, the PA system started years ago partially to prevent JET suicides and to generally support them. A well-supported JET is better JET at school and in the community. How awful to remove this kind of support when the system is already in place and PAs WANT to help and have been trained to offer some assistance or refer the JET to the right place. Disgusting, really, these changes.”

“The availability of counseling was one of the things that made the JET program stand out above the other programs, the fact that the program cared enough about its participants to guarantee accessibility of mental health support in a country where mental health counseling is not a widely acceptable option for people really made the JET program seem like it cared about the participants as individuals and not merely as English -speaking commodities. Now the new system, which essentially requires a person to forego any sort of anonymity in an effort to seek help in a time when they are likely already highly distressed seems so detrimental to the mental health and well being-of the participants in need, that it makes me wonder if the program cares about the participants in any capacity.”

“These kinds of reductions do not strengthen the public image that Japan's government or CLAIR values the contributions and sacrifices that foreign residents make in order to further their aims.”

“The reduction in support systems seems typical of the current JET Programme philosophy of reducing and dismantling all the wonderful support systems and incentives that existed for our predecessors and made the program great. “

“These changes reflect a serious disconnect with the reality of the JET program and a reluctance to take responsibility and care for the JETs CLAIR has brought to Japan. Yes, we are employed by our COs but we were recruited by the JET Program and fed high promises and expectations, and JET should aim to be better than private programs and regular people working in Japan. We should be moving to add more supports for JET, professionally, medically, and psychologically, not take them away suddenly and leave JETs with no way to voice our opinions other than these surveys.”

“I couldn't disagree with [the changes] more. The large built-in support system, both for general counseling and mental health, was one of the big benefits of choosing the JET Programme over companies that offer similar work in Japan. It was a sense of security that we weren't coming to Japan without support. These programs were started with the needs of JETs in mind and I see nothing that has changed to make them less necessary.”

“It makes the JET Program feel like more of a go-between for finding a job rather than a community

focused on positive change and internationalization. It also makes it feel like there is not a minimum standard for how JET Program participants are treated by their CO.”

“One of the great things about the program was the access to counseling specific to my situation. I can’t imagine how much more stressful it would be if I need counseling in the future and have to go through the Japanese system. For someone dealing with culture shock that doesn’t sound very helpful.”

CLAIR Isolating Itself from the JET community

Many JETs voiced confusion over the recent activities of CLAIR. Concerns included a lack of communication with its own participants of the JET Programme, and an increasing distance from those participants. The lack of communication has in turn resulted in JET participants resorting to guessing the intentions and thoughts of CLAIR. Lack of clarification has strengthened the assumptions.

Many respondents highlighted dire occurrences that were happening on the ground, such as ALT suicides, which either went unnoticed or were ignored by CLAIR and the JET Programme. For lack of any other information, JETs have concluded that CLAIR has prioritised minimising its own responsibilities over everything else, including the welfare of JETs in both the social and professional settings.

“CLAIR has been trying to get rid of many responsibilities recently: no more professional counsellors, no more mid-term conference for non-English speaking JETs, no more cooperation with AJET when it comes to organizing the Tokyo orientation. And all those decisions made without consulting JETs.”

“The distance between CLAIR and JETs was already big, now I really feel like they live in their own world.”

“Perhaps, though, we could better understand where CLAIR is coming from if they actually communicated with us the rationales and reasons. What CLAIR does not realize is that it continually undermines the credibility of the JET program.”

“CLAIR has demonstrated that they are both out of touch with the needs of JET participants, and don’t care what happens to them/us.”

“...another change being made by CLAIR to further demoralize JETS. Every year we are told we are important, but CLAIR’s actions such as removing counseling, gutting the Tokyo orientation, and requiring we talk to our contracting organization for personal issues prove that we are uncared for and seen as foreign pests.”

“I think this is completely ridiculous. CLAIR is no longer a transparent, if it even was in the beginning, organization. Now it is not even going to respond to ALT questions. It is essentially hidden behind the Prefectural Organizations. Though I can’t say I have been happy with much that CLAIR does, nor do I understand why they are separate from everything else.”

“It occurs to me that CLAIR is increasingly trying to delegate responsibility to other bodies and minimise its responsibilities (as with the decision to not allow AJET or Volunteer JETs at the Tokyo orientation any more). They are clearly more concerned with preserving their own image and any potential risk to it than they are with the welfare of JETs.”

“..It also seems like they are trying to get rid of CLAIR...”

“...ALT in Amagasaki committed suicide... I was also very disappointed in how the JET Program/CLAIR addressed this incident. The only reason I found out was through a distant relation from my home country and another ALT living in Japan. I still have ALTs who were also friends with this girl asking me about how she is and what she is up to. I have had to break this news multiple times to multiple ALTs. I feel like she was just swept under the rug and forgotten about. In my opinion, some kind of respectful announcement would have been appropriate. Her friends have had to grieve alone and question what happened.”

“Overall, I find this change in keeping with CLAIR’s recent trend of dismantling every JET support network they can, so I can’t say I’m surprised they’ve done it but it’s certainly added to my distrust of them. I wouldn’t be surprised if they start trying to dismantle even those networks they’re not a part of--they already cut ties with AJET in the hope it’ll die and there was no mention of PSG as a possible alternative venue for support with the new changes.”

Affects Turnover Rate

Numerous JETs stated that the changes to the counseling system have since affected their decisions to recontract and/or recommend the Programme to others. Various reasons were given for this. Concerns were voiced that mental health of JETs would be negatively affected, as well as their abilities to communicate and work effectively with their Contracting Organisations. As mental state will directly affect work performance, many JET participants noted that the Programme itself would suffer as a result, both internally and externally on an international public level. The general consensus was that the whole identity of the Programme had been lost.

“It’s appalling, to the degree that I don’t think I’ll ever recommend the JET Programme to anyone, ever. The length to which CLAIR is attempting to distance itself and the Programme from any responsibility or involvement from the people it recruits and hands over to various COs completely changes the identity of the Programme.”

“...strongly damage [the Program] in the eyes of current and alumni JETs, and I further believe that will trickle down to those future JETs that approach the current/alum community for their opinions of the JET program as a whole.”

“I will not be considering re contracting for more than 3 years due to the continuing lack of support I feel I am getting from the program.”

“The changes are awful. If I wasn’t a JET already, it would make me reconsider becoming one. I wouldn’t recommend JET to anybody now that these changes have been made.”

“I joined JET in large part because I knew I would be well-supported once here. I knew there would be challenges living away from what is familiar with the support of family and friends. I feel this is an essential service.”

“I would suspect that it will result in a lower retention rate of JETs, and will herald a significant downturn in the mental health and wellbeing of many more. If there are any significant problems, these will become exponentially bigger, and could lead to international problems. It will reduce the public standing of the JET program internationally too.”

“I think it takes a large step in the wrong direction and at worst I think the missing support could cause JET turnover and contract breaking to increase. Most problems in school are caused by communication breakdowns. Without the support of PAs to help facilitate communication, JETs without Japanese ability have one less way to improve their situations, and have lost the ability to even ask for advice on how to improve things by themselves. It can, and has, left JETs feeling

totally totally helpless in a situation that could easily be fixed (or have been avoided) if they had the support that they had before the changes.”

“Even before I applied for JET I encouraged people to pursue it because of the support networks and community but I couldn’t recommend the job to anyone coming in now. My new advice: find a nice eikaiwa and join the AJET community wherever you are.”

“I have had 3 friends leave the program and break contract because they needed to be in a place where getting mental health care was possible. This is a major weakness of the program and CLAIR should be trying to expand its network of available options to ALTs and not reduce it.”

Logistical Concerns

Implementation

JET participants voiced concern at the method and speed in which the changes were implemented, and many felt that the changes were hasty. Some JETs acknowledged that the recent changes have probably occurred from legal necessity, but also remarked on the impracticality of the result. Others were more concerned about what the changes and method of implementation implied within the relationship between JETs, CLAIR, and the COs, citing that many JETs were not made adequately aware, and there were many grey areas and gaps still left unexplained or under-explained. As such, while the stated intention of the changes were to create more interaction, dialogue, and understanding between JETs and their COs, the general consensus felt that the way in which the changes were introduced have made it more difficult for either party to appreciate the other, and have not properly established the groundwork necessary for the desired communication channels to be effective.

These implications were alarming, as several JETs believed the system’s implementation could lead to serious repercussions. Some existing issues cited included suicide, severe depression, and broken contracts, all of which have severe negative effects on the goals of internationalization for multiple parties involved. JETs largely reported strong concerns that both the manner in which the changes were communicated, as well as the changes themselves, would not lead to reductions of these occurrences, and may in fact contribute to an increase them. Therefore, the weight of these possibilities necessitates that changes be made sensibly and sensitively with the utmost regard for the well-being of all parties involved in order to reduce the probability of these tragedies at all costs.

“I am sure that much thought was put into the changes at CLAIR, particularly from the “legal responsibility” side of things. Nevertheless, I think most of them are more counterproductive than not, and the method(s) by which JETs were informed of the changes was/were abrupt, inconsistent, and insensitive. I hope that these changes have a positive rather than a negative effect on the JET community as a whole, but I am not optimistic.”

“If CLAIR should have done anything, they should have promoted the former system and made it better known to all JETs. Additionally, if had [sic] CLAIR really wanted to strengthen ties between JETs and their contracting organizations, I think there were other ways to do it. For example, they should really suggest monthly meetings between COs and JETs to discuss any daily problems. Perhaps if that were more common, then JETs would naturally feel more comfortable communicating with their COs about more serious issues. However, I don’t think taking away a safety net is the way to encourage that relationship.”

“...this may make sense bureaucratically, but in practice, completely inefficient.”

“While CLAIR may have had good intentions in implementing this new policy, they failed to recognize the reality that most JETs are in, and could have gone about implementing it in a smarter way.”

“I think that reasons behind the termination of counseling responsibilities for PAs seem valid (legal and confidentiality issues, overuse, etc.) but the manner in which the change has been handled by CLAIR leaves much to be desired. The timing for one caused the new JETs to receive a confusing mix of information as the new system came to light. Also, the suddenness of the change has left a gaping hole in the support system without any adequate suggestion as to what will fill the gap.”

“I think these changes have a good goal in mind, the goal of inserting the ALT into the team of coworkers they have in the CO, encouraging them to figure out how to solve their problems through the Japanese system they are and should be a part of. However, these changes fall short of encouragement for many of the ALTs, I'm sure. There need to be more ways to encourage conversation between the CO and ALT sides, in order to make this new system have synergy. I think there are expectations on the side of the ALT, CO, and CLAIR that are not being directly expressed, and these need to be talked about so we can understand each other, then move forward in unity, not as separate units.”

Role of the Prefectural Advisor

There is great confusion about the current role of the PAs, within both the general JET community and also among the PAs themselves. While many JETs acknowledge that PAs are not licensed professionals, they also feel that PAs are in a unique position to offer perspective and help JETs. As fellow JETs living abroad in a foreign country, many PAs have similar experiences to ALTs and can relate to their problems, or at least understand the ALTs much better than the COs or supervisors, many of whom have never lived outside of Japan.

JETs acknowledged and agreed that PAs should not be responsible for counseling, but state that helping people work through problems and listening skills are not equivalent to counseling. Most JETs feel that PAs should still act in some kind of referral capacity to the resources in their prefecture, if not in a direct counseling position. Many noted that it is easier for a JET participant to open up to their PA, even despite knowing that what the PA can do is limited. As per previous PA roles, many JETs feel the PAs could play an irreplaceable role in helping JETs to navigate and recognizing when referrals need to be made to professional services. Their help is furthermore invaluable for JETs who cannot effectively communicate in Japanese.

“I am a JET alumni and work for another Board of Education now in Japan as a direct hire, and we don't have anyone in a PA role. The difference is tremendous. Our contacts at the board of education are often swamped at work and unable to answer our requests in a timely fashion, and there are language and cultural misunderstandings all the time. Having a PA (doubled as a CIR in my CO's case) as a go-between made everything extremely smooth in retrospect.”

“...removing the PA as a central figure in crisis situations is also questionable and potentially dangerous.”

“PAs can help us navigate better what we decide to do while genuinely caring and being supportive... without risk of humiliation or stress or judgment.”

“Sometimes just having a sense of support with minor issues can ideally help prevent things from escalating and now there is nowhere to go that is “safe”.”

“They also are usually not Japanese, which is nice since pressure to act and essentially conform into Japanese culture is often high and it is comforting to talk to someone who understands that

pressure, as well your own culture.”

“In regards to “mental health issues,” I think it is difficult to define what the term means in the first place -- does this include general feelings of homesickness, culture shock, feeling lonely or isolated in the workplace, etc? I have been told that PAs have been instructed to direct any and all JETs with mental health issues to a counselor, but the problems mentioned above can generally be solved with a few emails or phone calls with someone who understands the situation the JET and the CO is in rather than jumping straight to an expensive and (in the case of many rural JETs) inaccessible service, especially if the JET wants advice in their native language.”

“I had a very difficult time in adjusting. It was a relief to speak to my PA. They listened and used compassionate speech. I felt heard and affirmed. Without the support of my PA and other AET’s, I would be very tempted to take a plane back to my country. This is saying a lot as: I am a mature JET, I have lived away from family and friends for long periods in the past, and I have taught as an ALT before.”

“I think that this policy change results in removing JETs’ primary advocate. JETs need to be able to contact the PAs before the CO. There are often communication problems with the CO. It is often the case that the PAs are needed to advocate/intercede with the CO on behalf of the JET. Also, it is often necessary for the JET to receive advice as to how to effectively communicate with the CO. The JET needs the PA to be available to advise. That is the whole function of having prefectural advisers.”

PA Perspectives

Lending credibility to the general opposition, PAs expressed that they were unhappy with the haste CLAIR made in applying changes and preparing PAs for the change. While they stated that they understood the reasoning behind the changes after learning more about them, one PA stated, “it’s one thing to have an idea/theory/ideal written on a piece of paper. It’s quite another thing for that idea to be brought to life and for it to work in the real world. It is here where CLAIR has failed us.” That sentiment was expressed by others in a variety of ways.

In summary, PAs felt the changes could have been more effective had they been applied more gradually. Their contributed comments speak poignantly for themselves, demonstrating that they are attempting to be understanding and positive about decisions made and CLAIR’s situation, but are also passionate about JETs they care for.

Particularly, PAs expressed that they were personally invested in their positions and felt that the services they provided were important to the care of JETs. One PA expressed frustration at the changes, describing the change as ineffectual at eliminating JETs’ problems, and counter-productively limiting his or her ability to assist JETs. In reflection, it appears that not only did the changes lead to less support for JETs, but inflicted additional strain on the PAs who volunteer to help them.

“I like to think of the support system change like I do with the changes made to the English language system (aka the new course of study). The government didn’t sit down one day, decide to make some changes to the way English was taught in Japan, and then make the changes a couple of months later. I mean, that would be stupid, right? So the changes were gradual and made over a lengthy period of time. Then why has CLAIR made some huge, ground-breaking, structure shaking changes in such a short space of time?! I’m not suggesting that the new support system comes into effect in 2 years time. I’m suggesting it should come into effect after several stages, so that everyone is aware of the changes, are given enough time to adjust to the changes, and are prepared for them. As a PA, I was given all of 2 weeks notice about the new support system changes before the changes took place. I feel like we have had little to no support and guidance into what we now do and to

what our new role is within the new support system and what we should do. The changes that were made were done too quickly, without giving people the chance to prepare. They were rushed, and as a result, they fail to provide any support whatsoever to those who are the most vulnerable and those who need it the most. There are too many grey areas and errors that could have been avoided if they had just decided to take their time.”

“I like part of the change, and after reading through the official documentation provided by CLAIR and the handouts we were given at the latest PA conference regarding the new support system, I understand what they are trying to do. However, it’s one thing to have an idea/theory/ideal written on a piece of paper. It’s quite another thing for that idea to be brought to life and for it to work in the real world. It is here where CLAIR has failed us.”

“For the most part, the changes themselves were well-motivated and for the better... However, I thought the execution could have been handled better; with nothing more than a letter sent to COs shortly before new JETs arrived, PAs had very little time to understand the changes and their implications themselves and prepare before the new JET year started, and many current JETs were left unaware of the changes.”

“I feel that if CLAIR was going to implement this policy, it should have been done more slowly, step-by-step, instead of all at once, while ensuring that reliable alternate sources of support were in place. For example, perhaps they could have discontinued the JET Line, but kept the CSC and immediate access to PAs in place. Next they could have assisted the prefectures in providing training to COs, then gradually passed responsibility on to them as opposed to the PAs. As the situation stands now I see many of my JETs having the same difficulties they were before, but not only do they no longer feel supported, I no longer feel like I have the resources to properly support them.”

Inadequacy of the New Subsidy

Many JETs are concerned about the practical benefit of the 10,000 yen subsidy, which will cover less than 2 sessions with a professional counselor at a 50% rate, and some also took offense. Overall, it appears to be a step in the right direction, but unfortunately is not viewed as proper support by the JET population in comparison to what they feel they have lost. Especially when considering the stigma of mental health issues in Japan, many JET participants remarked that it was highly unlikely they would make use of the subsidy. Moreover, as some JETs consider the worth of monetary sums in relation to their comparative worth in their home countries, it is possible that public sentiment may also be affected by the declining economy. Likewise, some JETs may find themselves unable to take advantage of the subsidy when impacted by unforeseen or unforeseeable costs from their home countries.

“I was in counseling in the past, my sessions were conducted by phone and cost 8,000 yen per session. I do not think 10,000 yen per year is adequate to cover the costs of ongoing mental health care in Japan. Why are mental health counseling costs not covered by the JET health insurance plan? Taking away PAs counseling duties would be understandable if more mental health professionals were being brought in to compensate, but it sounds like that is not the case. Quite frankly I am angry and upset, I do not believe CLAIR has the interests of JETs at heart.”

“The pittance offered for the counseling subsidy as well as the process needed to achieve it is careless at best and severely damaging at worst.”

“The current “mental health subsidy” seems to be a joke that relies on us not counting our zeroes lest we realize that we are on our own for any actual problems we may encounter.”

“The poor attempt at establishing a counseling assistance program to soften this blow is also in bad taste”

“CLAIR’s “subsidy” and the accompanying changes have been presented opaquely and I perceive the gesture is 100% disingenuous.”

“The new subsidy is a good idea... but only covers one or two sessions, which is not enough to do any good. This implies that the issue is either not being taken seriously, or that the issue is not an issue at all and can be “fixed” quickly and easily.”

“The reimbursement program which I’ve used doesn’t solve everything or take into consideration how much actual sessions cost that it’s a slap in the face instead of a gentle hint that professionals are best for some situations.”

“I also feel that the insurance coverage for psychiatric health is discouraging. A10,000yen cap will perhaps cover 2 or three sessions, but knowing the limit may discourage JETs from seeking professional help in the first place.”

Discrimination Toward Isolated JETs

JETs living in both remote and urban areas of Japan voiced concerns for those who are not within close proximity to English services. For such JETs, even if they wished to make use of the new subsidy and access professional services, it is not feasible, nor is the cost accounted for in the subsidy. In addition to lengthy travel time, JETs are likely to be reluctant to spend large sums of money on travelling to physical support stations, and then another large sum in addition to pay for the service. For those JETs especially, the PAs and the counseling service were the only support system they had, and removing them leaves them with even fewer resources than what they began with and isolates them further. Consequently, the blanket nature of the subsidy is discriminatory against those who must travel further, as it logistically means that JETs who are closer to applicable support services benefit more from the subsidy than those who are further away. Many JETs voiced concerns of increased risk of depression and suicide of participants whilst on the JET Programme as a result.

“If people are isolated in rural areas they will need to travel great distances just to find a counsellor which would in turn make it harder again for the JET to get the help that they need.”

“Also many of us live in very rural areas where access to someone who speaks English is very limited. I would not want to spend over \$100 an hour to try and get someone to understand me. I would also be worried that someone who does not understand English, or has [even] been overseas, would judge and direct me based on Japanese culture.”

“...problem is exacerbated for JETs who live in extremely isolated areas. If they have no other JETs to talk to and they don’t feel comfortable talking to their Japanese coworkers or contracting organizations, then they have no avenue to get help. People in that situation NEED more support than what is now being offered under this new system. I think these changes were a huge step backwards.”

“The changes simply put in hurdles for JETs to receive support without offering even an comparable alternative. While yes the stipend is now there, if we wish to take advantage of its pitiful compensation, many rural areas do not have English speaking mental health professionals. Essentially, JETs have been left high and dry in terms of options for seeking counseling.”

New Problems

Despite the recent changes to the counseling system, in practice, many things have not changed. JET participants are still going to PAs with concerns, and PAs are still responding as they always have been. While for the moment this may not pose a big problem, the lack of training that will be provided to future PAs will equate to new problems forming. If JETs continue to go to the PAs for problems, PAs will not be equipped to deal with them.

Additionally, a lack of a possible third party creates the potential for no accountability for COs, or no recourse for JETs who feel their concerns or problems are not being acknowledged or handled properly. One JET described COs' positions as, "free to give as little or as much support of the JET as they feel (not the JET feels) is necessary."

Further, communication breakdowns will be more abundant as Japanese language ability is not a requirement for participation in the Programme, yet many problems that JETs utilize PAs for require a measure of anonymity, objectivity, or privacy. Necessitating a translator from within the CO makes guaranteeing that objective third-party impossible, as well as removes any ability to maintain true anonymity or privacy.

"It appears that despite the changes, JETs are still going to PAs with concerns, and many current PAs are handling situations as they have previously been. However, this may prove to be a great problem if JETs continue going to PAs for help unofficially. There is great concern that the changes will push "unofficial" cases onto incoming PAs who will have no support or training of their own and nowhere to send JETs for help.."

"Under the old support system, we PAs were 'trained' to deal and help people out in these situations. Just because there has been a change to the support system doesn't mean that these situations magically disappear because we no longer have to deal with them/they're 'not our problem'. In a more abstract sense, I feel like the new support system refuses to admit and address that these issues actually do happen. It feels like CLAIR has just turned their backs on these problems, and have walked away from JETs. The new support system makes these serious issues more difficult to address and identify. It makes it more likely that these serious issues go unnoticed or not addressed. What kind of 'support system' does that to people?"

In Support of the Changes

A number of JETs also voiced support for the recent changes to the JET Programme counseling system. Various reasons were given for this. The most frequently mentioned reason was that PAs are not professional counselors and should therefore not be serving in such a role. Some respondents were concerned that this was even more the case since many PAs are in the same social circles as fellow JET participants. One PA respondent felt that responding to JET participants was suboptimal use of time. It has also been suggested that CLAIR should instead be acting as the mediator, as otherwise problems with Contracting Organisations would now be unresolved.

There were mixed opinions about the change in access for JETs to contact CLAIR directly. Some JETs felt that it was for the better and also stated that it should be expected for a JET participant to go through Contracting Organisations if JET participants are requiring counseling services through work. Some respondents that supported the changes expect that there were good reasons that caused CLAIR to make the changes. It was also mentioned that as these services are not provided in JETs' home countries, there is no reason to expect them in Japan, either. Overall, amongst the JET participants that responded in full or partial support of the changes to the counseling system, there are various opinions to which degree and what areas they support, and what further changes should be made.

"I think it's OK that PAs are no longer required to provide counseling services. I was leery about

non-professional counsellors serving this important function. Since PAs are also often hosting parties, etc it seemed odd to consult someone on very personal matters who you then could be partying with the next day. I think providing a subsidy for professional counseling is a better idea. However, how are JETs outside of big city centers supposed to find English counseling services? I think this is the main issue that needs to be addressed.”

“The changes are perfectly fine. There are probably good reasons which prompted CLAIR to make the changes. If a JET participant wants to seek counseling services via work, their employer (CO) should be aware. It makes sense that they approach their employer first before having access to any services. If the JET participant has privacy concerns, they can always choose to seek help privately. I support the changes which CLAIR has made. Lastly, this questionnaire should have a box to tick off whether not we support the changes. I hope that the AJET National Council will properly voice this opinion as well as all other opinions at the next opinions exchange with CLAIR.”

“I don’t see any major problems with the changes. Everything that has been abolished seems to have been replaced with something just as good or better.”

“The only issue I have is with the inability to directly contact CLAIR, especially when they are responsible for a variety of things and often request information from JET participants. As for the rest of the mental health cuts, well seeing as we don’t get that support in our home countries, why should we get it here?”

“It makes sense that the PAs no longer have counseling duties for mental health issues. That’s something I feel should be left to professionals. Getting rid of professionals who have worked with JETs and therefore already have knowledge about how the program works doesn’t seem like a good decision. I also agree with the idea to not allow JETs to contact CLAIR without first talking to their CO and PAs.”

“One change I do agree with is cutting off the average JET from direct contact with CLAIR. CLAIR can rarely do anything to change a JET’s situation, and inquiries to CLAIR can be made through PAs if the PAs need back up or further information. (The issue is having to go through the CO before a JET can get to a PA, as addressed above.) The PAs are much better equipped to deal with conflicts between a JET and a CO because they have local knowledge of procedures and people, and as CLAIR has no direct power of COs in the first place, I think their role in such a situation should be PA support if the PA finds it necessary.”

“I really like the premise of the changes - give JETs more autonomy and take away the PA crutch. As a PA myself, I often get really mundane questions from JETs, for example, do you have a map for this area? Do you know the train schedule for this event? How many days nenkyuu do I get? etc etc. All of this information is available in their contracts, in the GIH, and if they just used a bit of common sense they can find this information out by themselves. I find that the new support system changes take away the PA crutch and make JETs look out for themselves a bit more. It also gives me the opportunity to refer JETs as opposed to researching and giving them the answer, and so some of my time is freed up.”

“They do not affect me. I have not had a particularly difficult experience in Japan that I feel would require counseling.”

“Moving to a different country is a challenging adventure. Why should the government (not our employees) provide a select few with extra help that other expats do not receive. It will hopefully teach people to deal with their own problems. And anyway, if something serious happens then they

can just contact their supervisor for help - just like in the real world.”

“There was no point in even calling it counseling... if someone does not have the qualification - they should never be put in a place to help. Send people to a professional. The whole Programme needs a massive over view. Just not good enough.”

“I think that PA and CLAIR should not offer mental health counseling since these people generally do not hold the proper education or credentials. Also, since PAs are often in the same social circles as the ALTs in the prefecture, I think they cannot be trusted to keep information confidential. However, I had several issues with my CO who refused to answer questions which would have never been resolved without the assistance of CLAIR personnel. They should still agree to act as an intermediary in some situations but if a JET or group of JETs cannot contact them directly, it will now be impossible to resolve JET/CO relationship issues if a CO refuses to believe there is a problem. In my case, I contacted the JET line because I didn't have an appointed supervisor at my CO for months and was not told that my former supervisor left. So, when I had a serious issue that needed to be addressed, there was no one to contact at my CO. It was a mess and was only resolved when CLAIR intervened.”

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recently, CLAIR issued a new email to help JETs understand changes made to the counseling system. However, as one JET stated, some of the resources referenced “[give] the most generic of replies.” While there is a possibility that this perception could have been influenced by the JET’s emotional state at the time, it also is necessary to acknowledge that this simultaneously underscores the importance of a having an already established relationship of trust. PAs often represent that relationship more and can more effectively manage a JET’s concerns through their ability to relate.

Therefore, we support and recommend the following items be considered for implementation in order to rebuild the trust of JETs; establish a logistically valid and sound system of support; and begin repairing the public image of the JET Programme for the purpose of continued success in pursuit of internationalization in Japan.

- Let PAs continue to play a role in mediating until more thorough, evidence-based, objective support measures can be put in place.
- Offer training for COs in assisting JETs with issues regarding their well-being.
- A former JET who is now a licensed counselor and counseling trainer in New York has recently contacted AJET with the desire to provide PAs with counseling training. He may be uniquely suited to design and offer counseling services to COs in this capacity.
- Introduce requirements for COs to gather and maintain information (in Japanese as well as the JET’s native language,) on counseling and other services available to JETs within their areas that are capable of catering to their needs, or make it available for them from within CLAIR itself.
- Conversely, AJET may be able to assist in gathering this information and building a directory. However, for legal reasons, we would most likely not be able to recommend the services alone and would require the cooperation and support of CLAIR and the government to do so.

- Introduce a system of accountability wherein JETs have the anonymous and private ability through an objective third party to relay to CLAIR how they feel their well-being needs are being met by the CO.
- Include a detailed account of how those COs who receive unsatisfactory reviews will be offered support to attain better results in the future for transparency.
- Include additional details describing what steps will be taken in the event that COs consistently fail to meet the accountability standards determined.
- Detail transparently, in the JET's native language, any of his or her legal rights to privacy and confidentiality under Japanese law, and what recourse he or she has if the contracting organization fails to provide for those legal rights.

CONCLUSION

We would like to express our most sincere gratitude to CLAIR, MEXT, MIC, and MOFA for their willingness to continue open, positive, and productive dialogue with AJET and the JET community. We hope that the information and analyses detailed in this report will be beneficial in identifying positive ways to support the JET community and maintain the high standard of quality that the JET Programme has come to represent, both within Japan and abroad.

We would also like to extend our thanks to the dedicated, thoughtful, and hard-working participants of the JET Programme, without whom the JET Programme's collective success would not be possible.

The members of the National AJET Council are proud to work with all of the parties involved, and we hope to continue seeking ways to collaborate with everyone in pursuit of continued goodwill, progress, and mutual prosperity.

