



CHILDREN'S ALLIANCE

Story Bank: Understanding Hunger In Washington

Interviews with Washington's Hungry

I'm not here cause I want to be here. I'm here for my kids

-Mother at food bank, Spokane

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	3
Introduction – Who’s Hungry?	4
Lack of Affordable Housing	5
Stories: Families in Washington Share their Struggles	6, 7
Unemployment.	8
Stories: Families are Discouraged With the Job Market	9, 10
Health Issues, Mental Illness, and Lack of Health Care	11, 12
Stories: Poor Health Proves to be a Barrier for Families	13, 14
The “Hoops,” The Lines, The Loss of Dignity, The Hope	15, 16
Conclusion	17
Endnotes	18

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Who's Hungry?

I see hunger in Washington. I see it with the kids my kids go to school with. I see it with some of the people I work with. I see it too much.

-Working mother of two, Spokane

According to a state-by-state study on hunger recently conducted by the United States Department of Agriculture, Washington ranks as the fifth hungriest state in the nation. This fact continues to shock many Washingtonians who are in disbelief that many families in Washington struggle to put food on the table everyday. It is difficult to believe that in such a plentiful state 104,500 households experience hunger, and that 283,925¹ households are food insecure. These facts challenge the stereotypes and prejudices that we cultivate toward what we perceive to be hungry people. We often think of hunger as an issue far away and removed from the United States. We associate it with war, famine, destruction, far away places, and so forth. But in fact, hunger is often invisible; we don't know whom it is happening to or where; and it is likely the person who you least expect. Perhaps it is the harsh reality of hunger that makes it so difficult for us to accept that it exists in our own communities – it can happen to anyone.

In an effort to understand what barriers keep families from accessing or affording sufficient food for their diets, I began a process of interviewing with families that relied on assistance outside their own incomes in order to put food on the table. The interviews that were conducted as part of this story bank took place in food banks and meals programs in Spokane, Yakima, Sunnyside and Seattle, WA over the course of four months during 2003-2004. The individuals who were recruited to interview met simply two requirements: 1) they could not rely on their own income for food, and 2) they had children under the age of 18 years old. The persons interviewed ranged in age, sex, race/ethnicity, income levels, and participation in public assistance. Each one had a distinct experience that brought them to the food bank or meal program where we met each other. For many, it was their first time stepping foot into a food bank; for others, it was a more regular occurrence. However, a common sentiment was shared amongst all: no one *really* wanted to be there.

Once the interviews were completed, a few themes became extremely evident. Amongst the many barriers that individuals face in order to have sufficient nutritional food in their diets, three were consistently referred to: lack of affordable housing, unemployment, and health issues/healthcare. Other themes that many individuals touched upon included: insufficient food stamps, too many “hoops” to jump through in order to qualify for assistance, domestic violence, lack of awareness and knowledge regarding federal nutrition programs, language barriers, immigration status, kinship care, etc. For most of these families, food usually becomes the last priority when faced with a laundry list of bills, including: rent, electricity, heat, car insurance, healthcare, childcare, and telephone bills. Food is often the first necessity that is compromised in order to sustain a roof over one's head, comprehensive health insurance or a car to get to and from work/appointments.

When trying to understand hunger and all its complexities, the most important thing to keep in mind is that it takes tackling the root causes of hunger to improve the lives of hungry people. The solution cannot be simply providing food, but to engage in systemic changes which would support an environment where individuals would not have to sacrifice food over rent or medicine.

Lack of Affordable Housing

For two years, my five-year-old son and I were homeless.

-Domestic violence survivor and mother of two, Seattle

Housing costs are among one of the biggest contributors to food insecurity and hunger in the United States, especially in Washington. Due to high housing costs, families don't have enough money to pay for food once all of their bills are paid. Millions of Americans cannot afford safe and decent housing for themselves or their families. Harvard's Joint Center for Housing Studiesⁱⁱ reported that 3 in 10 U.S. households have affordability problems and that 14.3 million are severely cost burdened (50% of their incomes are spent on housing). Between 1997 and 2001, the number of lower-middle and middle-income households spending more than half their incomes on housing surged by more than 700,000. The report attributes these affordability pressures to stagnating income among lower-income households and rising housing costs.

According to EcoNorthwestⁱⁱⁱ, 17.8% of the population in Washington spends over 50% of their income on rent. Nine million, three hundred thousand households live in overcrowded units or housing classified as physically inadequate. A full-time minimum wage earner in Washington (\$7.01/hr) with an average yearly income of about \$14,580 would not be able to afford a modest two-bedroom unit. Considering the fact that the fair market rent for a two bedroom unit is \$788/month, it is nearly impossible for a minimum wage earner to afford such housing when they can only pay \$365 dollar a month at most^{iv}. Unless they work 86 hours per week or make \$15.15/hour, living in a two bedroom modest home is simply not a reality.^v

An overwhelming amount of individuals that were interviewed pointed to their housing costs as the main burden on their financial well-being. As a result, many resorted to: living in motel rooms, doubling up the number of roommates, shelters, homelessness, sleeping in their cars, moving to locations which are at a distance from public transportation, or simply paying rents that are too high. Others had section eight housing or another form of low-income housing, but often expressed the difficult and lengthy process to qualify for either. In any case, most families find that there is both a literal and figurative high price to pay in order to secure a roof over their heads, therefore the solution often becomes an uncomfortable, unsafe and unhealthy one.

Families in Washington Share Their Struggles with Housing Costs and Hunger:

Having section 8 vouchers means that if your electricity or water gets shut off, you lose your voucher. If you don't pay your portion of the rent you could lose your place. And so things like food, toilet paper, dish soap and laundry soap have to take a back seat because you're doing everything you can to keep the roof over your head. . . . When you're on the waiting list (for section 8) you're either sleeping in your car or in one of the many shelters around here. . . . My section 8 voucher has to be renewed every year and if they don't renew it, we don't have a place to live. The worst thing about being poor is knowing that the stability in my family is in somebody else's hands. It's not in my control.

—Mother of two, Seattle

Another conflict is transportation; if my husband does go to work there's only one car. The bus only stops on Washington. I live way in UnionGap, no bust stops there. There are families out there that struggle to get out here (to the food banks). —Pregnant woman and mother of five, Yakima

We are just living off of my cash and we can barely make it through. I make \$227 a week, and how far is that going to go? We can barely pay rent, which is \$150 a week for a motel room now. Right now we have a little place that we rent because at our other place they didn't want to do nothing with the rats, windows . . . the whole house was falling apart. We end up cooking with the microwave and an electric frying pan. We're scrounging, but we're making it.

—Family of four, Yakima

On occasion we have battled, especially where we used to live more isolated from the city. There were occasions that to have food we battled a lot, we had to buy food by digging for pennies, because we were too far from the city so it was very difficult. — Immigrant family of three, Yakima

Well, rent is so expensive everywhere. I'm on housing, that's the only way that I can make it at all, if it wasn't for that I don't know what I would do. I live for like two weeks of every month, and the other two weeks I just suffer through. You know maybe some help from my friends and food banks, but if it weren't for housing I don't know what I'd do. It's my saving grace; I really don't know what I'd do.

—Single woman dealing with depression, Yakima

I try to use the little that I can from my unemployment and from my food stamps because my rent is not that high because I share, I couldn't afford to live on my own otherwise because unemployment is so low and the food stamp itself is all very, very low. So it's trying to juggle or buy big bags of potatoes and stretch. It's just stretching the food. I don't feel like I eat as healthy as I'd like to eat or as nutritionally as I'd like to. –Single Woman, Spokane

It's really tough being single with kids and trying to work and to make ends meet because of the cost of things: the cost of housing, the cost of food, the cost of everything is just too high and the wages are not supporting . . . You just can't do it. You have to make the sacrifice. Do I get benefits for myself and have medical? Or do I try to make money to pay bills? Do you pay the heat or eat? You have to decide those things. –Working mother, Spokane

Unemployment

I have a bunch of certificates on my wall, but no job. Like I said, putting out all these applications for all these years. I bet you I've got one letter, one phone call, and I bet you I put out a hundred applications. I'm 52 you know, I'm getting up there.

-Single man, Spokane

In January 2004, the national unemployment rate was 5.6% equaling a total of 8.3 million unemployed Americans.^{vi} Washington has consistently exceeded the national unemployment rate for the last twenty-five years. Currently, Washington ranks fourth in the nation on the unemployment charts with a rate of 6.8% at the close of 2003. Yakima alone is ranked with the ninth highest unemployment rate for a metropolitan area with a rate of 12.3%.^{vii}

After 9/11, the economy was triggered into a recession that has had a lingering toll on the job market. More and more workers are exhausting their unemployment benefits and claiming bankruptcy. A record-high of 375,000 jobless workers exhausted their unemployment insurance in the month of January 2004, and an estimated 2 million workers will find themselves in the same predicament during the first half of the year, according to an analysis of Labor Department statistics by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities.^{viii} Currently in Washington, the *maximum* Weekly Benefit Amount is \$496 for new Unemployment Insurance claims filed with an effective date on or after January 4, 2004; the *minimum* Weekly Benefit Amount is \$109.^{ix} The benefit amount is based on the individual's earnings called the Base Year. New changes have been made that went to affect in January 2004 which will include stricter job search requirements for people receiving unemployment benefits.

There are obvious links between unemployment and hunger. Lack of money equals lack of access to resources such as food. If a family is living on a tight budget due to lack of income, food is once again one of the first items to be compromised. Many families also noted the psychological distress associated with unemployment. Most felt depressed and disillusioned, helpless and guilty. Of the families interviewed, many had once lived comfortable lives and had received a high school education or were completing/had completed their college education. The drastic switch from dining out to standing in food lines is a very traumatic experience. Relying on public assistance and other's help does not come easy to most. Budgeting and stretching out the dollar is like living in a whole new world for many of the newly unemployed. A common theme once again was that no one was unemployed because they *wanted* to be.

Many of the individuals interviewed were unemployed due to one or a few of the following (not an exhaustive list): injury, mental illness, unreliability of seasonal work, sudden illness or accident, trying to complete high school/college education, lack of access to affordable childcare, or were simply laid off. Most individuals were actively seeking employment for over a year, but were not met with a healthy job market. It was obvious that finding a job often became a full-time job in and of itself and a struggle that took a very harsh toll on the well-being of the entire family.

Families are discouraged with the job market:

The solution is that I need to stop being poor so that I can take care of my family. The reality of that is that with the economy being the way it is, until I get my bachelor's degree, that's probably not going to happen. –Mother of two at Seattle food bank

Living on TANF and food stamps, and especially after 9/11, I mean look at all the Boeing people who went from making \$20 an hour to living on TANF. That's a hell of an adjustment . . . if you're used to being able to do all this stuff and then you go to learn, you're selling your house, you're selling your car, and you're learning from going from \$40,000 a year, you worry about the other stuff because you have to, you have to worry about where the heat is coming from and you have to wonder where the hot and cold running water is coming from, you've gotta worry how you're gonna have a roof over your head. Food is the last thing on your mind. –Domestic violence survivor and mother of two, Seattle

Both of us worked for a contractor for Boeing, but when 9/11 came, they went down, we went down. We both got laid off at the same time. He's still looking for jobs, and I'm staying with the baby for now. We'll try to grow a little bit, and go from there . . . Right now we're still coming up on a little bit of savings. So with zero income and a baby to support, we look for help. –Mother of one, Seattle

It went okay except when the transition when I went back to work because it went away and it's hard because you get cut off and you haven't had a chance, your paycheck hasn't come, so it's hard to . . . I lost my cash assistance and food assistance all at the same time, it was pretty tough to transition into working. – Working mother of three, Spokane

I became unemployed and I had no income and I needed some food assistance, so that's what led me to the food stamp program. I had an emergency situation . . . I'm only eligible for a small amount of food stamps, under \$20. So it helps, but it's not enough . . . it's really difficult when you're unemployed because unemployment payments are so low, and when they adjust against the food stamps it makes it very difficult to have a stable diet. So it's trying to juggle or buy big bags of potatoes and stretch. It's just stretching the food. – Single woman, Spokane

If you need it, you need it. That's just how it is. I for one was making \$30,000 a year in Nashville and I could go to the best restaurants, and thinking of food not being in abundance for me was never an issue, and now for it to be an issue just like I said you've go to suck up, you gotta buck up. It's either do this or not have, and there's no way that I'd let my grandkids go hungry. – Kinship caregiver of her two grandkids, Spokane

I see the families coming here (food bank), and it's not just single parent families. People are out of work or they're ill, that's probably the biggest thing – got laid off, out of work, or they're ill. That's probably the biggest reasons why people are visiting with you (at the food bank). You don't really find nobody who says "oh I don't really want to work, I want to live off of the government and come to the food bank as often as I can." You know . . . I've never run into anybody like that. – Working mother of two, Spokane

I think the foundation of the [hunger] problem is not enough work. We are in a place where it's all temporary jobs. Right now, I haven't worked since October 2003. That was my last day of work. So it's been two months. Right now, we could work but the patrons don't want to start because there are 8 to 12 inches of snow. Other places are going out of business. So the crisis in the valley is because of the temporary/seasonal jobs. In the summer, neither my wife and I, nor my friends go to food banks to receive these energy/food assistances or something like that because there is enough work and we can work. But now, in that time I could get almost \$300 a paycheck. Now I get \$168 a week with unemployment. So it's like we can't make our bills on time, the rent/light/telephone. . . we battle a lot. I want to work, but there's no work" –Family of four, Yakima

Health Issues, Mental Illness, And Lack of Health Care

They won't even give my husband an orthopedic chair for his back. He can't even sit at his desk to work. – Mother of four, Spokane

In 2002, over half a million Washington residents were uninsured. This is the equivalent of all residents of Spokane, Tacoma, and Bellevue combined.^x Despite the massive amount of uninsured families, several health care cuts were still made in Washington in 2002 and 2003. These results included: the loss of health insurance coverage for approximately 29,000 immigrants^{xi}, reduction of dental coverage by 25%, changes in co-payments, Basic Health eligibility and benefits and costs, and new payments for visual care. Administrative barriers have also increased making it more difficult for families to stay on their health care plans. For example, after the 2003 legislative session, families are now required to re-apply for health insurance every 6 months instead of once a year, and are asked to provide more paperwork to qualify their children for health insurance.^{xii} And for the first time ever the state plans to impose monthly premiums for thousands of children on Medicaid, a major threat to children's health programs. Premium amounts in Washington will be some of the worst in the nation for families living at or close to the federal poverty level (FPL), which is \$15,260 for a family of three in Washington.^{xiii} Twenty-four thousand children alone are estimated to lose health insurance due to premiums their families cannot afford.^{xiv} In total, nearly 47,000 kids are expected to lose health insurance as a result of last year's legislative decisions.

For many individuals, it was their health that kept them from finding a job. Many individuals shared stories of "once upon a time..." when they were healthy and living comfortably, but a sudden accident or illness changed their world in a matter of minutes. A combination of costs, change in life-style and difficulty in dealing with the mental/physical stress, forced many of these individuals to make decisions that they had never been confronted with before such as, "do I eat or do I buy my medication?" or "can I make it to the food bank today with so much pain?" or "do I tell my employer that I can't stand for more than a few hours?" Many individuals were also grappling with mental illnesses that often kept them from feeling energized (due to either condition or medication), left out and stigmatized.

When speaking to people in the community, health care costs are overwhelmingly cited as yet another major burden on the household. Most of the adults interviewed did not have health coverage, relied on liability insurance or on their Supplemental Security Income (SSI). Their children either received medical coupons or were covered by the state's Basic Health Plan. The cost to keep themselves healthy or to pay their children's premiums (when applicable) was a consistent theme throughout. Families also expressed their frustrations with the challenges in finding a health care provider to cover their needs, the paperwork involved, and the quality of care that they received. Lastly, many individuals were not eligible to receive SSI despite the incredible pain or distress that they were in due to a trauma or accident. For these individuals, finding a job that would be easy on their health did not seem like a reality anytime in the near future.

Poor Health Proves to be a Barrier:

I've been trying to find a doctor that takes new patients and I haven't been able to find one for over a year. I have an open coupon, and still can't find medical care. The bad part about going through the food bank for me is having to stand in line. And because I have to do that, it is a very difficult thing. And so, there are times that I don't go to the food banks simply because I'm not physically able to stand in line that day because of whatever is going on in my system. And I understand that it needs to be fixed, but by the opposite, I can't find a doctor. I have to be healthy enough to go to a food bank, but I can't get the medical care to get healthy to go to the food bank.

—Mother of two, Seattle

I am a single mother of seven. I was recently injured on the job and am receiving Liability and Insurance, TANF and food stamps. With all that added up, I still don't make enough to depend on my income for food. I have to come to the food banks. Because of my injury, I will never be able to return to my career as a registered nurse. I don't know what I'll do.

—Mother of seven recently injured on the job, Seattle

My daughter needs to get her wisdom teeth yanked and they won't do it, they won't accept those medical coupons. And she's hurtin', and what am I supposed to do? It's sad. I called everyone in the book and no one accepts our medical coupons. Or you're on a waiting list for a couple of years, and it's not fair for the kids to have that pain when they shouldn't. Mother of three receiving SSI, Yakima

It's just hard to survive. And it think it causes a lot of depression and anxiety when you don't have money to put gas in your car, you can't go anywhere, and where are you going to go to fit in? If someone asks you what you're doing what you do for a living and you say "I'm on SSI," then BOOM, the axe comes down right there. But what they don't really realize is that some handicaps you can't really see, and then they stick all these labels on you. See I'm manic-depressive and the medications make you feel so tired. Not yourself. Single woman dealing with depression, Yakima

I used to be a fire fighter, and then I had my rollerblading accident. I've had to restructure myself to do different things now. . . So I'm trying to cope with the fact that I can't play firefighter anymore although I wanted to be one since I was a little kid. . . I really had no intention of doing anything like that, and then when I had my accident it put me in a position where I really needed some help. It took every bit of energy I had to get up there. It was really tough walking because for a person who felt like they could handle everything, to have to ask for help is real tough. —Mother of two boys, Spokane

When we had to get help it makes you feel degraded and going into the office, you feel like you know “man I wish that I didn’t have to do this.” It’s especially hard for me because my health doesn’t even let me stand and do the dishes in my own house, so I start feeling really worthless and hopeless, and you know, and changing the medications around . . . it’s not like it used to be.

-Kinship caregiver, Spokane

My husband lost his job due to an automobile accident. He can’t even get social security benefits. He has a back injury and had to quit working. I have no choice but to stay in school and work part-time and make a better life for my kids. With only \$400 a month for six people, it’s just not enough. I don’t see my kids until bedtime.

-Mother of four, Spokane

Because of my domestic violence, I suffer from Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome and my son suffers from Attention Deficit and Hyper-Activity Disorder. Dealing with the issues that go with this ADHD and with these issues that go with my PTSD, and trying to figure out how to be successful and succeed. . . it’s really hard. –Mother of two, Seattle

The “Hoops,” the Lines, the Loss of Dignity The Hope

There are too many reasons why people experience hunger. There are too many experiences to be told. There are too many fears. There are too many frustrations. But there is also hope to be shared.

What follows are some of those experiences, fears and frustrations that people shared with me during the interviews. They range from criticisms of both food banks and food assistance to what it feels like to have no control over what you eat, the desperation, faith in a higher being and concerns over nutritious food.

I've always been of the belief that if I put my children first and make sure they had everything that they needed, that I have faith in God then I gotta believe that God will take care of what I can't cause right now I can't take care of everything. –Mother of two, Seattle

They [the food banks] support us a lot, we are happy with them especially for their concern with children, because I can hold out a lot living w/o food than my kids. So like that we've struggled. And not just us, we know a lot of people, alot of friends, who have battled especially that person who comes and can't get unemployment because they don't have a good security, or food stamps, so they battle a lot. What happens is that the kids grow up in a life where they feel very malnourished because they don't have sufficient nutrition. –Father of two, Yakima

Well growing up my mom had been on it [food stamps]. I basically have the outlook of being ostracized. I felt very different from the other kids. It was tough watching my mom eat potato chips all the time and we were left to make pancakes if we wanted to eat. It was real tough. I looked at it as being a punishment than anything else. . . It was tough coming here and asking for help. It's hard to have to ask for help. It almost makes me feel like I'm back on that ladder again. - Mother of two, Spokane

Once a month!?!? There are bills that need to be paid like people who need to have a good car to get to work, and if you have a good car then you have to make payments honey, you have to pay the rent, plus utilities plus the phone. Without the phone you wouldn't be able to get a call. . . I still gotta buy pampers, I still gotta buy food. I still gotta buy for the whole month of 31 days! You can't just wait one day to eat and then maybe eat the next day. A kid is always going to eat, especially a woman who is pregnant, but they only offer it once a month and I think that's hard for families. –Pregnant mother of five, Yakima

I'm not out of the hole yet, but I'm not also down in the mud anymore. And I know when you're in the bottom of that hole, you just don't see any way out of it. Once in a while, someone gets lucky enough to get thrown a lifeline, and not everyone gets lucky enough to find that lifeline – the rope to climb out of that hole. When you're in a hole they say "dig your way out," and all I've learned is digging only makes the hole bigger. You've got to find a way to climb out of it. –Mother of two, Seattle

Yeah I don't know what will happen if I qualify. Them sometimes I think they will be calling me to all kinds of appointments and I can't miss work. I don't know how that all works, and I hear that they call you for a lot of appointments. And I feel that if they're asking me to see them during my working hours that I will not be able to miss my work. –Working mother of four commenting on why she has not applied for food stamps, Yakima

The food stamps are good to have but they don't meet. The last week of the month is food bank week, but they don't give a lot of stuff folks eat. I call it famine food. But I will not watch my kids turn into little skeletons. – Mother struggling with both mental and physical illnesses, Spokane

I know that I'm not always going to be poor and I'm not always going to be here. And when I get out of this hole, I play on being one of the people with the lifeline trying to pull somebody else up. Mother of two, Seattle

It's far from being the paperless system we were told it's supposed to be. One of the things that I have to do is because I have a vehicle so I have to provide a copy of my insurance and a copy of the title to my car because it's an asset. I mean, my car to most people is not an asset. But I have to have all of that, and if they don't have all of that then I'm hiding something . . . and so you know trying to provide documentation, trying to prove you don't have stocks, bonds, mutual funds, IRA's, you know to the point that they check your bank account. –Mother of two, Seattle

It was grueling to apply for them. It was a booklet. They want blood. They make you jump through so many hoops just to get basic needs. You end up becoming scared. –Mother of four commenting on food stamp application, Spokane

For the kids. . . if I had five tortillas and I had four kids, I would give it to them, one for my wife, and I would go without eating because those are my kids. They come first. – Father of two in Yakima

*We are all in this world together and we all strugglin': no one's perfect, se we gotta do what we gotta do.
–Single man, Spokane*

That's part of our responsibility, is other people, to help other people. They're not proud of where they are, they didn't ask to be there, it just happened and it could happen to anybody. So I think we need to realize that other people are our responsibility and realizing that these people are stuck . . . and very few get out. But they're our responsibility too. –Mother of two, Seattle

Conclusion

After completing nearly thirty-five interviews, visiting a variety of food banks and meals programs, and touring through four different cities, I am left knowing that just a few things are for sure – no one wants to be hungry; no one wants to be poor; and no one wants to be dependent on the system. Every individual I spoke with expressed his or her struggle with hunger and poverty as a hole you just can't dig your way out of. You need a lifeline. You need someone to throw you a rope in order to *climb* out.

The themes expressed in this report highlight only a few of the root causes of hunger and those particular to Washington State. Affordable housing, unemployment and healthcare are just three of the major barriers to the lack of adequate food that Washington residents are facing. There are issues with the efficiency and comprehensiveness of food assistance programs, immigration status, discrimination, racism, mental illness, pride and so on. What these interviews do accomplish is reminding us that ending hunger is not just about food assistance. These individuals were all extremely grateful for the food banks that they visited, the staff at the agencies, the food stamps that they did receive, and all the other safety nets that they relied on. However, despite the utmost appreciation for such programs, for the most part what they are each looking for is a *solution*: a job, better health care, counseling, childcare or a safe home. One or many of these were holding these individuals back from fulfilling what they most wanted – comfortable lives, choice, and freedom.

When advocating on behalf of the hungry in Washington, whether through the media, policy or the grassroots, it is important to listen to these voices. These individuals have experienced the system inside and out. They understand what got them there and what holds them down, but they cannot always see the way out. As anti-hunger advocates it is important to understand that the way out involves your help and compassion by working towards a system that provides that lifeline.

Endnotes

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