BUNCOMBE COUNTY HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES FISCAL YEAR 2021 ANNUAL REPORT









STRONGER TOGETHER



A MESSAGE FROM THE DIRECTOR

A ll people are born with a need to create and sustain positive, secure relationships across their lifespan with the people and the world around them. In FY21, COVID-19 threatened this basic need in some way for all of us- bringing a sense of uncertainty to our lives. Learning in school, earning an income, finding healthcare, connecting with friends and family, attending church and participating in traditions or gatherings- all became much harder, if not sometimes impossible. Everyone in our community was impacted, and most especially our aging population and their families, schoolchildren, and frontline workers.

Our priority at Health and Human Services (HHS) has been to mitigate the spread of the virus and provide critical services to our most vulnerable residents. While it was challenging to know that we had no control over the trajectory of the pandemic and its devastating impacts to our community, it was amazing to see how our staff and community came together to rise to the occasion. Much like a bad storm can threaten the stability and integrity of a building, the ability to sustain wellbeing and safety through difficulty is crucial. There are organizations in every community that exist to build supports in life and Buncombe County HHS is one of these agencies. We are here to establish a foundation for health, safety, and opportunity in our communities, repair it should it begin to falter, and to build a human services infrastructure to ensure strength for future generations. We also believe that race, gender, or any social position shouldn't get in the way of this. Our agency works hard to identify and address social barriers to services and the wellbeing of our residents.

I am constantly amazed at the work of this agency and how deeply it impacts our community. We continue to provide a robust array of services that meet and exceed Federal and State performance benchmarks. Staff continue to use data to respond to the needs of our community and they continue to learn and grow in ways that challenge norms and help them to show up differently. They continue to reach across service areas to address complex needs and issues. Our community partners continue to reach out in ways that weave together a stronger bond and fabric of community.

We are grateful to our County Manager, Avril Pinder, for her steady presence and thoughtful leadership throughout the pandemic. I am deeply grateful to our Public Health Staff for their amazing work in contact tracing and vaccinating our community. Economic Services Staff has done an amazing job of processing applications for financial assistance and Social Work Services continues their incredibly challenging work even in the face of a pandemic. Our community can feel safer knowing that we are here, weathering any storm and growing stronger together.



Stoney Blevins Health & Human Services Director

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We appreciate the guidance and support of the County Commissioners, County Manager, and Governing Boards.

HEALTH & HUMAN SERVICES BOARD

Lucy Lawrence, Chair Johnnie Grant, Vice-Chair Amanda Edwards Amy Lenell Steve Valeika Elizabeth Lima Mona Ellum Greg Narron Carol Coulson Linda Weldon Jesus Amadeo Valdez Savannah Lamb LeeAnne Tucker Jacquelyn Hallum **Yvette Jives** Rachel Keener Jim Pitts, PhD David Thompson Martha Salyers Dan Frayne

COUNTY COMMISSIONERS

BUNCOMBE COUNTY MANAGER

Avril Pinder

Brownie Newman (Chairman) Jasmine Beach-Ferrara Amanda Edwards Robert Pressley Parker Sloan Terri Wells Al Whitesides

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HEALTH & HUMAN SERVICES BOARD

The BCHHS Board took action to reorganize the board meeting format with the goal of better connecting to the work happening on the ground. Board members agreed to establish sub-committees based on their areas of expertise, interest, and ability to contribute in meaningful ways. The new subcommittee structure began in FY21 and allows for a deeper focus on service delivery and creates more space for focused conversation outcomes, advocacy needs, and solutions. The declaration of racism as a public health crisis helps our agency to organize around key principles, like recognizing inequity, learning the connection between histories and current realities, and creating space to challenge the norms of systemic oppression and racial injustice. The HHS Board is reorienting to better learn from each other and grow together, leverage our collective power, and to take meaningful actions that serve everyone in our community.

INEQUITIES DATA USED TO GUIDE EFFORTS & IMPACT

A t the beginning of FY2021, the BCHHS Board declared racism as a public health and safety crisis, followed by a joint resolution of the Buncombe County Health and Human Services Board, the Justice Resource Advisory Council, and the Buncombe County Board of Commissioners. These declarations were prompted by the following research findings specific to Buncombe County:

- Life expectancy for Black residents was, on average, 5.9 years shorter (73.4 years) compared to white residents (79.3 years).
- The overall death rate for Black residents was 38% higher than white residents.
- In 2016, 13.7% of whites experienced poverty compared to 27.2% of Blacks and 36.4% of Hispanics.
- The average per capita income for whites was \$28,480 compared to \$15,335 for Blacks and \$13,121 for Hispanics.
- ★ These statistics are based on the 2018 Buncombe County Community Health Assessment.

The result of these declarations and focus helped to organize resources to prioritize outreach efforts as an agency and certainly were a driving factor for our COVID-19 response.

SOCIAL WORK SERVICES

SOCIAL WORK

n FY21, our division received 4,664 Child Protective Services intake reports. Of these reports, 2,978 CPS reports met criteria and were investigated. There was a finding related to child maltreatment in 472 of those cases. Family in Home Services worked to prevent an average of 399 children per month from entering foster care and successfully did so in 98.99% of the cases. An average of 301 children per month were in the custody of BCHHS in FY21.

BCHHS works toward permanency for these youth, prioritizing reunification with their parents, but also recognizes their need for timely permanence through a safe and stable placement. Working to overcome significant barriers due to the pandemic, Adoptions Social Workers worked diligently throughout the pandemic to ensure children who are legally free for adoption find safe, permanent adoptive homes. From July 1, 2020 to June 30, 2021, 36 adoptions were fi-

ADULT & AGING SERVICES

B CHHS offers a source of stability and safety for adults in Buncombe County through the licensing and monitoring of adult care homes to guardianship and adult foster care services. In FY21, our agency received 1,984 Adult Protective Services (APS) reports. Of these reports, 1,282 APS reports were investigated along with 159 screened in facility complaints. Adult Services was able to assist these adults with important decisions about their care and provide periodic visitation to ensure their wellbeing.

Adult Services provides a placement program that assists adults in moving to Adult Care homes/family care homes and skilled care and in FY21 they received 39 placement inquiries. The Special Assistance In-home program assisted 30 clients who are on Medicaid and need in-home care and assistance with paying for health and safety supports. nalized in Buncombe County. Each of these children had a team of social workers, supervisors, attorneys and support staff who impacted their journeys to find safe permanence.

To build on our County's Family Justice Center model, Social Work Services has invested in a training model to improve domestic-violence informed and proficient practice through the Safe and Together Institute. Using a train the trainer approach, we trained about half of our staff in FY 21 with the goal of training the remaining staff and multiple community partners in FY22 and 23. This model strives to keep children safe and together with their non-offending parents and to view domestic violence as a parenting choice made by the offending parent. The focus is on changing the behaviors of the offending parent to stop the pattern of violence that impacts child safety and well-being.

Adult and Aging Services was a critical part of the COVID-19 response, especially the Adult Home Specialists, who specifically served on the Congregate Care Ready Team to provide timely and critical connections for staff and facility administrators to protect this vulnerable population.

Buncombe County Adult and Aging Services took on the lead agency role for the Home and Community Care Block Grant (HCCBG) funding. Through an HCCBG advisory committee, recommendations were made for pass through funding of over two million dollars for aging services programs. BCHHS continues to monitor spending and service provision using a Results Based Accountability approach in partnership with Land of Sky Regional Council and the advisory committee.



ENHANCED SUPPORTS FOR TEENS IN FOSTER CARE

The Teen Unit formed on March 1, 2020. Social workers worked closely with approximately 85 teens (age 13-17) in agency custody and young adults in the 18-21 Program. There was steady growth during FY21 with consistent participation in the program. The Teen Unit partnered with Goodwill Industries for LINKS services offered for all teens and young adults age 13-21. New partnerships to address adolescent substance use disorders, housing supports and LGBTQ+ supports were developed through collaboration with Guardian Ad Litem Association, Goodwill Industries, Buncombe County Schools, Healthy Transitions, Youth Villages, Appalachian Community Counseling, among others.

ORGANIZATIONAL CARE MODEL

S ocial Work Services has worked to operationalize the County's core values of respect, integrity, collaboration, honesty, and equity through the development and implementation of an organizational care model designed to engage at all levels of the organization to promote physical and psychological safety, develop trusting relationships and prioritize mental wellness. There are ongoing training, meeting and learning opportunities for staff to support the organizational care model including Trauma in Child Welfare, Reconnect for Resiliency, Care Tyme, BIPOC Meet-Up, Racial Equity Drop-ins, Safe and Together, book club and dialogue groups, Trauma Responsive Culture Strategic Planning, Motivational Interviewing, Critical Incident Stress Management debriefings and more.

PUBLIC HEALTH

PUBLIC HEALTH NURSES PLAYED A UNIQUE ROLE IN FY21

The World Health Organization and American Nurses Association designated 2020-2021 the "Year of the Nurse and Midwife". Nurses have been and continue to be on the front lines of the COVID-19 Pandemic response, including the Public Health Nurses working for Buncombe County HHS. In addition to leading COVID-19 pandemic response activities, our Public Health Nurses continue to provide routine public health

services to clients – clinical services, care coordination for mothers and their children, and investigation of many other reportable diseases beyond COVID-19. Public Health Nurses are uniquely positioned to support this pandemic through their focus on improving health through social justice, ethics, and quality care to individuals, communities, and entire populations.



WIC

Women, Infants, Children (WIC) provides access to healthy food, breastfeeding support and encouragement for moms-to-be, new moms and families with young children. Approximately \$2.66 million (\$2,668,414.86) in WIC dollars were spent at local grocery stores and pharmacies. FY21 saw an increase for WIC participation from a monthly average of 4,113 clients to 4,883 clients per month. Of these clients, 1,010 were women, 947 were infants, and 2,868 clients were children.

The Buncombe County WIC program achieved several notable accomplishments. Some of these include receiving the USDA's Breast-

feeding Support Award of Excellence and developing outreach and education tools that have been recognized at the state level and are utilized by local agencies statewide. WIC staff are also currently training grocery store employees to become "WIC Experts" in an effort to improve the WIC shopping experience for our participants and vendors. Sarah Bennett, Nutrition Program Manager for the Buncombe County Women, Infants, and Children Program (WIC), was selected by the Board of Directors for the National WIC Association, the non-profit arm of WIC that provides policy and advocacy guidance for the program.

ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH DOES IT ALL DURING COVID

uncombe County Health and Human Services Environmental Health Section (BCEH). worked diligently to meet the needs of our residents since the beginning of COVID-19. In March, BCEH, in conjunction with multiple community partners, managed the Isolation and Quarantine housing portion of the COVID-19 response for residents of Buncombe County who tested positive for COVID-19 but were unable to isolate safely in their own homes or to residents who are awaiting test results in order to be placed into congregate housing. Managing the complex and time-sensitive needs of this population was no small task, with many late hours and coordination between families, service agencies, and the properties where

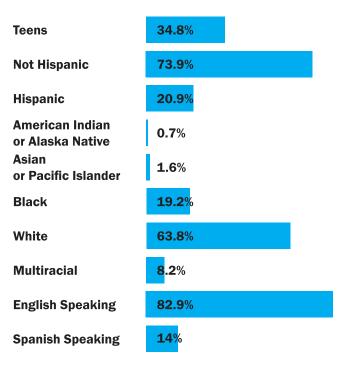
individuals were housed. To date, 360 Buncombe County residents utilized this service. Of these, 272 were homeless, 90 were COVID Positive, 69 people were under quarantine. BCHHS would like to extend a special thank you those community partners who helped to make Isolation & Quarantine housing possible.

BCEH continued to provide excellent service to the community throughout FY21. In FY21, BCEH completed 3,087 inspections, issued 2,578 well / septic permits. BCEH also continued its excellent partnership with the Asheville Independent Restaurant Association to develop relationships with restaurant owners to create feedback loops to improve food safety for all.

NURSE FAMILY PARTNERSHIP

or 12 years now, Nurse-Family Partnership (NFP) has been working with families in Buncombe County. NFP works by having specially trained nurses regularly visit moms-to-be, starting early in the pregnancy and continuing through the child's second birthday. The expectant moms benefit by getting the care and support they need to have a healthy pregnancy. At the same time, new mothers develop a close relationship with a nurse who becomes a trusted resource they can rely on for advice on everything from safely caring for their child to taking steps to provide a stable, secure future for them both. NFP families experience fewer preterm births, higher immunization rates, and higher levels of breastfeeding when compared to national and state averages. NFP served 264 families in FY21 and graduated 57 families in FY21!

NFP Clients in FY2021:



NFP staff also served the community in the pandemic by serving as vaccinators out in the field, in the clinics, and through homebound vaccination teams. Of course, they continued to work with their clients and new babies to ensure safety and wellbeing during an incredibly stressful time for new mothers and fathers. NFP has served 1,104 families since the start of the program in 2009.

SAFER TOGETHER

O ne major grant, Safer Together, was awarded to BCHHS in the Fall of 2019 from the Bureau of Justice Affairs. This grant continues to support the overall success of Buncombe's substance use disorder continuum of services.

The Safer Together grant provides Post-Overdose Response Team (PORT) services, expanded access to free, lifesaving Medication Assisted Treatment (MAT), recovery housing supports, and linkages to services addressing social determinants of health.

The Safer Together grant also supports Buncombe County's continuum of harm reduction services, through connecting participants with Peer Support services, as well as engaging in reciprocal referrals to and from other programs such as the county-funded Syringe Services Program and the State and Dogwood Health grant-funded program, Community Linkages to Care & Re-entry.

The Syringe Services Program (SSP) at Coxe Avenue served 1,089 clients in FY21, connected 70 individuals to substance use treatment and 75 individuals to STD testing. Mobile services and Peer Support outreach continued to distribute life-saving Naloxone, fentanyl test strips and hygiene supplies to individuals in the community.

In FY21, the Reentry Services program was able

to connect 379 individuals to services, provided housing for 25 people and connected clients to services like telehealth and peer support. As a part of the Reentry program, the Buncombe County Detention Facility handed out 950 Naloxone kits to justice involved individuals as they were released from the Detention Facility. Through the Safer Together Post-Overdose Response grant, MAT/Suboxone medication was provided to 118 individuals in FY21.

The CARE (Compassion, Access, Recovery, Education) Team, a cross-sector group of substance use and harm reduction providers, peer support specialist, and community advocates, continued their focus on the 4-year strategic plan goals for the group. These goals include: equitable access to care while preserving individual autonomy; improving the community's capacity for prevention, treatment and harm reduction best practices; promoting trauma-responsive recovery resources; and advocating for justice in social determinants of health for people who use substances. The multidisciplinary coalition met virtually over the course of FY21 and has been able to produce deliverables such as the Faces of Recovery media and poster campaign, steps towards state-wide patient brokering legislation, and ongoing evaluation and monitoring related to identified population health indicators around substance use.

EQUITY BRANCH OF INCIDENT COMMAND STRUCTURE

B uncombe County was an early adopter of embedding equity into all aspect of the COVID-19 response including establishing an Equity Branch in the Incident Command Structure. Equity-related needs were discussed at all planning meetings. The Equity Branch also introduced the use of the Census tract data and the Social Vulnerability Index for planning testing and vaccine outreach efforts.

Partnerships with faith communities, neighborhood associations, and other community-based organizations to offer "pop-up" testing and vaccination in locations throughout Buncombe County that are accessible to historically marginalized populations yielded great turnout from community members in these areas.

PUBLIC HEALTH GAINS KEY LEADER

S tacie Saunders, MPH, joined the agency as the Public Health Director in August, 2020. Stacie brought strong public health knowledge, leadership ability, relationships, and experience to our public health world here in Buncombe County. Stacie was the Public Health Director in Alamance County, NC, for ten years prior to her role in Buncombe. She is the president of the NC Association of Local Health Directors and has a Master's Degree in Public Health from Johns Hopkins University. While this transition was somewhat challenging due to COVID, Stacie has been a strong leader from day one and worked to ensure a smooth transition during difficult times. Many thanks to Dr. Mullendore, who stepped up to assume dual roles as Public Health Director and Medical Director for many months. These two key leaders have been essential in our community's COVID response and we are so grateful for their expertise, diligence, sleepless nights, passion for the work, and love of community.

VACCINATION EFFORTS

The long journey through FY21 continued with a strong partnership with Emergency Services as the lead in COVID-19 testing efforts. BCHHS began to engage in its unique role as mass vaccinators, administering 96,086 COVID-19 vaccines in FY21.

BCHHS administered 1st and 2nd doses of COVID-19 vaccines to staff and residents of 89 congregate care facilities in FY21. The types of facilities included family care homes, behavioral health facilities (e.g., group homes for individuals with IDD, substance use disorder residential treatment facilities, therapeutic boarding schools), shelters for persons experiencing homelessness, adult day programs, and a low income senior living community. AB Tech, Buncombe County Schools, and Biltmore Church South assisted in the mass vaccination efforts through the use of their facilities. Vaccination efforts were operated from these locations beginning January 2021 and lasted until summer of 2021. Many County staff were reassigned from other departments to assist with registration and decontamination, putting them right in the middle of this historic event. Highlights of this time period include an extended visit by the Mexican Consulate, a visit by Governor Roy Cooper, Buncombe County staff and volunteer engagement, and growing partnerships to support our community's health. This was a tremendous effort by all involved, worthy of its own annual report.



ECONOMIC SERVICES

Throughout the pandemic, clients continued to reach out to our agency for Housing/ Utility Assistance including information on Food and Nutrition Services Monthly Supplements, access to medical benefits, and information on COVID vaccines, testing, and other COVID information. Thousands of people have called, emailed, and visited the 40 Coxe Avenue location to be connected to these important benefits to help make ends meet. Economic Services staff continues a tradition of excellent customer services and technical processing skills as evidenced in their most recent Medicaid Audit where they scored 99%, the highest score in North Carolina.

The Economic Services Division has been heavily invested in making sure that individuals and families have remained in their homes during the pandemic. Using a variety of funding over the last 18 months, One Buncombe, Coronavirus Relief Funds stimulus dollars as well as Emergency Rental Assistance dollars from the US Treasury, we provided assistance to 4,975 applicants and expended \$9.7 Million dollars in rental, mortgage and utility assistance in FY21.

The Food and Nutrition Services (FNS) program provides monthly payments to individuals and families to assist them in accessing nutritious meals. Due to the pandemic, state and federal regulation have been modified to allow for higher monthly payments to ensure greater access in the face of economic challenges. Buncombe County residents received over \$95M in FNS benefits in FY21 through our Economic Services Division, accounting for 34,706 total individuals who received FNS benefits in this fiscal year.

Childcare was a major challenge in FY21 as childcare providers tried to adjust to the demands of the pandemic. Data pulled from available months (September 2020 service month through the May 2021 service month) shows that the unduplicated number of children served for Buncombe County was 2,084. Early childhood development and supporting the needs of working families continues to be a priority for our agency and we are excited to serve more families as childcare providers are able to increase their capacity to care for children.

Applications for Medicaid benefits went down slightly in FY21, with 19,016 Medicaid applications processed as compared to 20,979 applications in FY20. However, the number of recipients increased due to a Federal action that essentially banned any negative actions against recipients with the goal of ensuring that as many people as possible were able to keep their Medicaid benefits.





CHERI WOOD AND PAMELA PODWELL RECOGNIZED FOR EXCELLENCE IN SERVICE DURING COVID-19

C heri Wood and Pamela Podwell won the 2021 North Carolina Child Support Team of the Year Award for their dedication to serving families, providing outstanding customer service, and surpassing their goals set forth by the state. In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, Cheri and Pam worked together

to create new ways to meet their state mandated goals and setting the gold standard for service delivery during the pandemic. They were so successful that they were tapped to train staff in other counties in their pandemic response systems so other counties could experience similar successes.

VETERANS SERVICE OFFICE

The Veterans Services Office offers assistance in a wide range of services to our nation's veterans, service members and their families. This office assisted Buncombe County Veterans in securing \$5,901,977 in federal disability and pension benefits in FY21. Our office fielded 7,901 phone calls and saw 373 Veterans in person.

ADMINISTRATION

BUSINESS & OPERATIONS TEAM

HS Operations and Facilities supports all HHS programs and their staff to ensure they can provide services with the necessary equipment and to ensure staff and clients are served in a safe and clean environment. Operations and Facilities is responsible for the purchasing all office, print and medical supplies for over 700 staff in several departments including Employee Health, Public Health and Division of Social Services as needed to our 6 HHS buildings. The division is the point of contact between Buncombe County Fleet Services, General Services and BCHHS.

PREPAREDNESS & SAFETY / SECURITY

The Public Health Preparedness Section completed 100% of its required preparedness exercises in FY21. Public Health Preparedness continues to use the partnerships developed throughout the years in the COVID-19 response. Partners include AB Tech, Western Carolina University, United Way, and the UNC

BCHHS COMMUNICATIONS TEAM

The BCHHS Communications Team has been the largest contributor of messaging, graphic design, and information sharing throughout the COVID-19 response. This team provides support for signage, presentations, graphic design and print needs, website support and social medial management. The BCHHS Public Information Officer led media relations throughThe HHS Business Office manages the budgeting and state financial reporting for all divisions of BCHHS. The team monitors expenditures to ensure proper coding and compliance and submits monthly reporting in order to receive over \$45 million dollars of funding that BCHHS receives each year. The team also oversees contract formulation and compliance of approximately 250 HHS contracts and agreements and manages payroll for all BCHHS employees.

Eshelman School of Pharmacy. Primarily used as vaccinators at vaccination clinics, these partners have provided much needed capacity throughout the response. All of these relationships have been extremely valuable and they speak to our community's ability to embrace a whole community preparedness mindset.

out the pandemic in FY21, hosting hundreds of press conferences, fielding thousands of contacts with media, and supporting key staff with communication needs. This team expanded and contracted throughout the pandemic and, from day one, has been responsible for ensuring language access for all media events, signage, web content, and engagement opportunities.

QUALITY ASSURANCE TEAM

The HHS Quality and Performance Team includes Quality Assurance (QA) and Quality Improvement (QI) across Social Work, Economic Services and Public Health. Quality Assurance provides a review of work already completed, while Quality Improvement is focused on identifying solutions and implementing changes that improve effective and responsive business operations.

The team conducts hundreds of social work practice reviews in Child and Adult Services and occasionally conducts client interviews to learn firsthand from clients how our social work services have impacted their lives. Between July 2020 and June 2021, Social Work QA completed 179 Child Services reviews and 148 Adult Services reviews. Buncombe Social Work QA also serves as a pilot county for the state's new Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) initiative for Adult Services and Alison Mann, QA Manager, represents Buncombe County on the state's CQI Design Team for child welfare.

With the help of Economic Services QA, Buncombe County met NC Medicaid's highest accuracy standards in the most recent 2020 Recipient Eligibility Determination Audit (REDA), which determines eligibility approval and denial/termination of benefits. Buncombe County achieved the best score of any county in the state with a score of 99%. In fact, no county overpayments to clients were identified in the audit and hardly any technical processing errors were found. This outcome shows how important it is for Quality Assurance to be a part of the business process by catching possible deficiencies before they show up as an error at the State level.

CONCLUSION

Y21 was a year where COVID ruled. While often times this was a challenge, it showed us who we really were. It was a year of weaving together stronger bonds with each other and our community partners. FY21 truly embodied the One Buncombe spirit and offered the opportunity to grow and learn together. We look forward to infusing the momentum back into our innovative programs, equity work, board engagement, and staff development in FY22 and to supporting the 2025 Strategic Plan with our high quality array of services.

HEALTH & HUMAN SERVICES LEADERSHIP

ADMINISTRATION Stoney Blevins, Department Director

PUBLIC HEALTH SERVICES Stacie Saunders, Public Health Division Director

SOCIAL WORK SERVICES Rebecca Smith, Social Work Division Director

ECONOMIC SERVICES Phillip Hardin, Economic Division Director

BUSINESS OPERATIONS Lisa White, Business Operations Director

COMMUNICATIONS Stacey Wood, Communications Director



3 EASY WAYS TO CONNECT TO SERVICES

VISIT OUR OFFICES: 40 COXE AVENUE (Adult & Aging Services, Economic Services, Public Health Services, Veterans Services, Wic Services)



339 NEW LEICESTER HIGHWAY (WIC SERVICES)

35 WOODFIN STREET (Social Work Services)

CALL US: ECONOMIC SERVICES: (828) 250-5500

SOCIAL WORK SERVICES: (828) 250-5500

PUBLIC HEALTH SERVICES: (828) 250-5000

VISIT OUR WEBPAGE: www.buncombecounty.org/hhs

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