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**Youth Work Matters to Victoria**

**Strengthening young people’s access to youth workers across Victoria**

**February 2018**

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**About YACVic**

Youth Affairs Council Victoria (YACVic) is the peak body and leading policy advocate on young people’s issues in Victoria. YACVic’s vision is that young Victorians have their rights upheld and are valued as active participants in their communities.

YACVic is an independent, not-for-profit, member driven organisation that represents young people (aged 12-25 years) and the sector that works with them. Through our research, advocacy and services, we:

* lead policy responses on issues affecting young people
* represent the youth sector and elevate young people’s voices to government
* resource high-quality youth work practice.

We are driven by our members and prioritise their needs and concerns.

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**Giving young people a great start**

Victoria should be a place where all young people feel they belong. Every young person deserves to enjoy good health, a high-quality education, a pathway into meaningful employment, and opportunities to develop independence and connect with culture, family and friends. All young people deserve to feel valued and heard, and to have the chance to play an active part in the life of our community.

Young people also need supportive relationships with trusted adults in their local community – adults who listen to young people, believe in them and support them to pursue their dreams. Having trusted adults around is a strong protective factor for young people, helping to improve their health and prevent school disengagement, mental health problems and anti-social behaviours.[[1]](#endnote-1)

There are over a million young Victorians aged 12-25; young people make up 18% of our community.[[2]](#endnote-2) As Victoria’s population continues to grow – it’s projected to rise by 58% by 2046[[3]](#endnote-3) – services and supports for young people will need to keep pace.

But not all young Victorians have the support they need. Young people without the right assistance and connections in place are more vulnerable than their peers to things like school disengagement, unemployment, poor mental health, and involvement in the justice system. This is where youth work can make a difference.

Youth workers are unique professionals who help young people connect, contribute and thrive, for everybody's benefit. Youth workers are already making significant, positive changes to the communities in which they operate. Investment in well-designed, high-quality youth work interventions shows considerable returns to communities and governments in the long term.

However, at present, Victorian youth workers often operate on very limited, short-term resourcing. They also face challenges in communicating the value of their work to decision-makers in their organisations and the wider community. And while the practice and philosophy of youth work aligns neatly with several key policy documents guiding the work of the Victorian Government, youth workers are hardly ever named as stakeholders in these important strategies.

As the state’s peak body for young people and the youth sector, Youth Affairs Council Victoria (YACVic) calls on the Victorian Government to change this by increasing the number of trained, supported youth workers in our rural, regional and metropolitan communities. This will be best achieved via:

1. A state-wide youth work strategy so every young person can access the right support, whether they live in rural, regional or metropolitan Victoria.
2. A new initiative to recruit, train and employ youth workers from diverse communities, focused on those where young people experience high levels of disadvantage, exclusion or crime.
3. More youth workers employed to help address our state’s priority issues, such as employment, mental health, youth justice and education.

**Not all young Victorians have the support they need**

* Nearly 30% of young Victorians in Years 5, 8 and 11 do not agree that they have a trusted adult in their lives. Young Victorians are at higher risk of not trusting the adults in their lives if they are growing up in a disadvantaged community or a one-parent family, or if they come from a language background other than English. Older teenagers are less likely than primary school aged children to agree they have a trusted adult to support them.[[4]](#endnote-4)
* Almost 1 in 4 young people aged 15-19 show signs of mental illness, and young women are nearly twice as likely as young men to show signs of poor mental health.[[5]](#endnote-5) Young people report that the biggest barriers to seeking help for a mental health problem are shyness, worrying about what people might think, and not wanting to talk to a stranger.[[6]](#endnote-6) Young people living with poor mental health or complex disadvantage are less likely than their peers to ask their parents, friends and teachers for support. But they are more likely than their peers to seek support from a community agency.[[7]](#endnote-7)
* Every year, approx. 2,100 young Victorians are under Youth Justice supervision.[[8]](#endnote-8) Approximately a quarter of young people on youth justice orders come from just 3% of Victoria’s postcodes.[[9]](#endnote-9) Police Chief Commissioner Graham Ashton observed of disadvantaged young people who commit crimes: “They don't feel like they are a part of our broader society; they don't feel like they are welcomed to participate in it” – “ We heard stories about distressing family circumstances. This is a critical issue – the role of families, and how we support children who lack caring and supportive adults in their lives. Everyone needs someone to disappoint – to know that someone cares and takes an interest in their wellbeing..”[[10]](#endnote-10)
* Around 10,000 young Victorians drop out of secondary school each year without finishing Year 12.[[11]](#endnote-11)
* The unemployment rate for young Victorians who are not studying full-time is more than 11%.[[12]](#endnote-12)
* Coping with stress is a big concern for 45% of young Victorians aged 15-19. A third of young Victorians say they are concerned about school or study problems, almost a third are concerned about body image, and a fifth are concerned about depression. Young women are more likely than young men to report feeling concerned about stress, school, body image and many other issues.[[13]](#endnote-13)
* Aboriginal young people are less likely than their non-Aboriginal peers to feel positive about their lives, and one in ten young Aboriginal men rate their happiness level as “zero”.[[14]](#endnote-14) Aboriginal students in Victoria are less likely than their peers to feel that their teachers listen to them and understand their needs.[[15]](#endnote-15)

To help address these and other issues, we need to invest in quality youth work interventions right around Victoria.

**What is youth work?**

Youth workers are unique professionals who build trust and understanding between young people, their families and communities. Working in many different settings – including schools, local government, youth justice and health services – youth workers help young people to:

* Make informed, age-appropriate choices about important things like education, work, health, housing and relationships.
* Overcome challenges, like mental health issues or unemployment.
* Maximise opportunities, like becoming more independent, playing a leadership role in community, building skills, connecting with other people, or simply enjoying more of the good things in their lives.

A youth work professional treats the young person as their priority and works holistically with them, taking into account everything that’s happening in the young person’s life, family and community. They can build relationships with young people who don’t trust formal services.[[16]](#endnote-16)

Youth workers also transform communities by working with services, schools, businesses, police and local governments to build strong, welcoming neighbourhoods where all young people can connect, contribute and thrive. Youth workers uphold young people’s rights and promote young people’s achievements and contributions.[[17]](#endnote-17)

In 2013, the Australian Youth Affairs Coalition produced an agreed National Definition of Youth Work: a practice that “places young people and their interests first…where the youth worker operates alongside the young person in their context. Youth work is an empowering practice that advocates for and facilitates a young person’s independence, participation in society, connectedness and realisation of their rights.” Youth work is a profession with a proud history in Australia and around the world, with an international research base.

In Victoria, youth workers are expected to follow the [*Code of Ethical Practice for the Victorian Youth Sector*](https://www.yacvic.org.au/resources/code-of-ethical-practice/). The practice responsibilities of ethical youth work are:

* Recognition of Indigenous peoples
* Young people as the primary consideration
* Duty of care towards the young person
* Respect for young people’s privacy and confidentiality
* Strict professional boundaries
* Transparency, honesty and integrity
* Recognising and responding to young people’s social context
* Non-discrimination, equity and self-awareness
* Working cooperatively and collaboratively with families and services
* Knowledge, skills and self-care.[[18]](#endnote-18)

**“Did a youth worker help you when you were young?”**

In 2017, YACVic surveyed Victorians about the supports they’d received from youth workers. The anonymous answers we received (only some of which are reproduced here) point to the many different benefits youth workers deliver to young people.

The quotations below are from survey respondents, some of whom described experiencing distressing life events, including family violence, self-harm and suicidal thoughts, before being supported by youth workers. Please know that all the respondents also described their lives as much safer and happier nowadays. However, if any of their comments raise concerns for you, we suggest contacting [Lifeline](https://www.lifeline.org.au/), or, if you are a young person, [Kids Helpline](https://kidshelpline.com.au/) or [eheadspace](https://eheadspace.org.au/).

***“My youth worker supported me to....”***

“look after myself. finish school. get a job”.

“Keep safe, get Mum help, food support, school support and a place to go to”.

“Empower me to re-engage in education at my own pace”.

“Believe and listen to me. Speak out and report [abuse] to the police and child protection”.

“Find a job, get my own place, get my license”.

“Be able to talk to my mum more and to understand where other people were coming from. She [my youth worker] also helped me to be more involved in the community and help run National Youth Week.”

“Build my confidence, believe in myself, make new friends”.

“Find safe housing. Find mental health services.”

“Get clean, and get a home.”

“See purpose in my life.”

“Feel good about myself.”

“Refill applications and contact Centrelink youth friendly workers which led to me gaining Youth Allowance”.

“they [my youth worker] encouraged me to get involved in youth council and youth events in our local area and to use my ideas and experiences to help others.”

“My youth worker helped me to talk about my problems, trust adults again, build my self esteem, learn about myself, and engage in education.”

***If it wasn't for my youth worker, I would have....?***

“Given up and not pushed myself”.

“Not made it where I am today.”

“missed out on so many life changing opportunities and chances to follow my dreams.”

“Definitely I would of dropped out of school in Year 12 or not ended up in University completing my degree”.

“Been homeless, without any food or shelter. I would have felt like I was all alone.”

“Possibly never finished high school”.

“Struggled to get into tertiary education”

“Prob not gotten out of my bad spot”.

“felt like I was never going to be good enough”.

“Probably been in jail”.

“juvey or on the street”.

“hurt myself”.

“lost control of my life.”

“Kept being abused and probably suicide”.

“Been dead, or still addicted to ice.”

“Dead or still homeless.”

“I would have fallen more between the cracks of the system.”

“If it wasn't for my youth worker I would be dead. Instead I am studying at uni and working as community worker.” [[19]](#footnote-1)

**The value of youth work**

By helping young people stay in education, find work and lead healthy lives, youth workers help reduce public spending on policing, welfare and crisis support services. Investing in youth work also helps us build stronger, safer, more supportive neighbourhoods that are great places for all young people to grow up.

An analysis of the value of youth work by the National Youth Council of Ireland found the economic benefits exceeded the costs by more than double; over a 10 year period, every €1 invested in youth work would show a €2.2 return. This was due to the estimated reduction in problems like crime and drug use, and a rise in young people’s engagement in education, volunteering and work.[[20]](#endnote-19)

A broader study of youth services in the United Kingdom found that providing dedicated, responsive, one-on-one support (in their model, one key worker per 12 vulnerable young people) and better coordinated youth services would show a return of £5.65 for every £1 invested over a five year period. These costs reflect estimated reductions in drug use, imprisonment and use of crisis services, and an increase in employment, independence and capable parenting:

“The strongest message interviewers heard from young people was that having someone to go to whom they trusted, had a connection with and who they felt cared about them, was fundamental to achieving better outcomes in their lives. All of those who were being supported named a specific adult whom they felt had largely helped them make the significant changes in their lives.”[[21]](#endnote-20)

The parts of a worker’s role that young people identified as most important included emotional support, practical guidance, and assistance to access services and gradually build independence. They wanted these supports from a reliable, caring adult who was easy to connect with, not multiple anonymous services.[[22]](#endnote-21)

As these comments suggest, the relationships youth workers build with young people can be as beneficial as the material supports they deliver. While many other professionals focus on delivering a single service to a client, youth workers build multi-dimensional relationships with young people, which are foundational to their work. These relationships can have significant educative and therapeutic value for young people, who are at a life stage when building connections outside the family is vital to their development. This can be especially true for young people with complex needs who have not engaged well with services in the past.[[23]](#endnote-22)

Our members and stakeholders tell us that to work well with young people, youth workers need to be in a community for the long term and put into place interventions which have been shown to work well there. They need to be backed by local service partnerships, adequate infrastructure and strategic youth plans. There must also be sufficient opportunities, professional supports and career pathways to attract and retain youth workers in specific communities, including rural communities.

High-quality youth work interventions should also encourage different stakeholders (such as schools and services) to work better together and should strengthen young people’s relationships with others. There should be an emphasis on continuing to build the strengths of youth workers themselves, in areas including leadership and ethical practice.[[24]](#endnote-23)

**Youth work aligns with Victorian Government policy priorities**

The philosophy and practice of youth work align well with several key policy priorities and strategic plans guiding the work of the Victorian Government. Some of these plans express support for the (broad) approaches to service delivery which traditionally have been championed by youth workers.

However, at present, none of these plans actually mention youth work. We would welcome further strategic planning to recognise and strengthen the roles youth workers can play in helping bring all these plans to fruition.

***Roadmap for Reform: strong families, safe children (2016)***

Victoria’s *Roadmap for Reform: strong families, safe children* sets out to reform the child and family services system to meet the needs of vulnerable families, through improved prevention, early intervention, and service coordination.

The *Roadmap* recognises that families’ health and wellbeing can be strengthened by a positive sense of belonging to place and community. It asserts the importance of enabling children, young people and parents to take part in welcoming, universal community spaces, as well as supporting vulnerable young people to stay engaged in education and transition into training and employment.

The documentundertakes that in the future, key features of the social services system will include:

“more visible and non-stigmatising entry points to services, making it easier for people to find help themselves.”

“pro-actively connecting people at risk to support through existing services (such as early childhood services, schools, general practitioners, financial counselling and community health services) and informal networks (such as a trusted community member).”[[25]](#endnote-24)

The *Roadmap* expresses concern that young people are less likely than other age groups to seek out professional support concerning family violence. It notes that young people are prone to invisibility in the traditional child protection and family violence sectors, and mentions that youth services “such as homework clubs and arts and recreation groups” have a role to play in supporting young people to get the right help.[[26]](#endnote-25)

***10 Year Mental Health Plan (2016)***

One of the target outcomes of Victoria’s *10-Year Mental Health Plan* is “infants, children, young people and their families are supported to develop the life skills and abilities to manage their own mental health”.

The *Mental Health Plan* stresses the need to strengthen partnerships, collaboration and information-sharing between the various services and sectors which support people’s mental health and wellbeing, including health and community services and schools. The plan also describes working with community services to develop consumer and carer peer support practice models, including for young people.

***Royal Commission into Family Violence (2016)***

Victoria’s Royal Commission into Family Violence found that age-appropriate therapeutic interventions were essential for young people who have experienced family violence, and that these should happen as early as possible. The Commission called for increased youth supports across areas including housing, justice diversion and respectful relationships education.

The Commissioners observed that some young people who had experienced violence were supported to build resilience and recover from trauma by taking part in high quality youth mentoring programs such as Big Brother and Big Sister. Through such programs, they could connect with “role models who demonstrate non-violent behaviours, positive adult behaviour and healthy relationships”.[[27]](#endnote-26) However, the Commissioners also observed that many programs which had proved helpful to vulnerable young people had been small-scale and subject to inadequate, short-term and erratic funding.

***Victorian Suicide Prevention Framework 2016–25***

The first objective of Victoria’s *Suicide Prevention* is “Build resilience”. The plan observes that people can build resilience through positive relationships and nurturing connections to family, friends and community. It adds:

“Communities can build resilience through fostering social cohesion, increasing understanding of diverse cultural and social identities, providing a safe and secure environment, and ensuring access to healthcare and health promotion. Participation in community groups of all kinds – from formal clubs to informal peer support groups – provides social and cultural connections, encourages positive beliefs and reasons for living, and establishes networks of personal and informal support that strengthen resilience. Peer-based volunteer groups also protect people from the effects of discrimination and stigma and provide a source of social and personal strengths for many vulnerable or marginalised people.”[[28]](#endnote-27)

These significant strategic plans are articulating approaches to supporting young people which align well with and/or are already part of youth work. It is disappointing that none of the plans explicitly name youth workers as stakeholders. However, we feel there is great potential for further work to identify, leverage and strengthen the roles youth workers play in relation to these issues.

The importance of engaging with youth work principles is backed up by the Victorian Government’s own [*Youth Engagement Charter*](http://www.youthcentral.vic.gov.au/get-involved/youth-programs-and-events/victorian-government-youth-policy), which is designed to be implemented across government. The Charter lists “Belonging, connectedness and identity” amongst its guiding principles, and states “Connectedness to family, peers and community must be prioritised in order for young people to have a sense of belonging and identity.”[[29]](#endnote-28)

**Resourcing for youth work**

Victoria is lucky to have great youth workers and some valued programs providing funding for youth work, notably the Victorian Government’s *Empower Youth*, *Engage* and *FReeZA* programs. *Engage* (2018-20)is resourced at $12.3 million over three years, distributed between 107 programs. *FReeZA* (running since 1997)is resourced at $7.2 million over three years, distributed across 80 organisations. *Empower Youth* (2016)is resourced at $4 million over three years, distributed across eight organisations(this funding was especially welcome, being the first substantial new investment in youth work that Victoria had seen for some time).

While these are worthy and well-appreciated programs, they are not enough to meet the need for more support for young people in of all our communities. Further complications arise from youth work interventions’ reliance on limited, short-term funding, such as project grants of one to three years. Funding may come from different levels of government or philanthropy, and from multiple program streams. As a result, many youth workers and projects operate on small, precarious budgets. Some rural communities don’t have access to even one trained youth worker. (Even when a youth worker is in place, the regional spread and diversity of young people can still make it challenging to appropriately support the whole community.) Meanwhile, some regional cities and metropolitan growth suburbs struggle to meet the needs of their rising numbers of young people, and services in key areas like family violence are operating without the expert support that youth workers could potentially provide.

This limited resourcing weakens the effectiveness of youth work and limits youth workers’ ability to successfully demonstrate the value of what they do. It makes it hard for youth and community services to attract and retain quality staff who build meaningful, supportive relationships with young people. When YACVic and VCOSS surveyed the Victorian youth services sector in 2013, one respondent commented:

“With the high turnover of youth workers and funding agreements it can just be another adult who abandoned these young people, another person that they need to re–tell their story to. Not having stable youth service funding means that young people who need help and support because they don’t have it at home or at school really lose out.”[[30]](#endnote-29)

The expertise of youth workers can also be threatened by the absorption of community services into large “mainstream” providers, some of which have no expertise in supporting young people.

All of this means that young Victorians, their families and communities lose out.

In 2013, the Victorian Council of Social Service (VCOSS) and YACVic released the results of a survey of 213 youth services from across every Victorian local government area (LGA). The majority of respondents identified service gaps in their LGAs, most commonly in the spaces of housing/homelessness support, mental health support, education and living skills – all areas in which youth workers can provide support to young people. Over 30% of respondents also identified local gaps in “generalist youth work”.

Comments from some of those who responded to the survey included:

“The withdrawal of funding for generalist youth workers has had a huge impact. Youth often do not access specialist services.”

“Lack of access to generalist youth workers has meant young people are falling through gaps. They may not meet certain (specialist service) criteria at this point. But they may well do if they are not linked in with generalist supports as an early intervention strategy.”

“Desperate for a generalist youth support worker. (It is) our biggest gap.”

“We need more generalist youth support services, who can work with who ever, on what ever.”

“More generalist youth workers not tied to specific age groups or issues would be fantastic.”[[31]](#endnote-30)

**“Wanting to ‘do good’ is not enough!” – managing perceptions of youth work**

Unfortunately, not all adults see value in providing supports specifically for young people. Others assume that parents and teachers can take care of all young people’s needs, despite the evidence that this doesn’t always work. For instance, only around a quarter of students in Years 10-12 agree that their teachers listen to them and understand their needs,[[32]](#endnote-31) and 21% of young Victorians do not agree they would approach a parent for help with an important issue.[[33]](#endnote-32)

Unlike some professionals, youth workers can’t always assume their role will be understood and supported by those above them. Many youth workers operate in broad service settings where their CEO, senior management or board of governance may have come from a different professional background. Educating “up” about the value of youth work can be a challenging part of a youth worker’s job.

When VCOSS and YACVic surveyed the youth sector about the biggest challenges youth and community workers were experiencing, some people described how they struggled to educate funding bodies and the wider community about the role and value of youth services in general. One respondent observed:

“(Lack of) understanding about what youth services actually do with young people and the value that is placed on this work. The way we as a sector are able to articulate our work and provide evidence and research of the impact (we have) and outcomes (for young people).”[[34]](#endnote-33)

Some people have also pondered whether the diversity of youth work – a strength of the profession in many ways – might have a down side in terms of outside perceptions. Youth workers do not have one standard model; they work in many different services, doing everything from large-scale community planning to providing intensive support for marginalised young people. Many have Bachelor of Youth Work qualifications; many do not, but are guided by the practices and philosophy of youth work. Meanwhile, there are other figures in the community who identify as youth workers, but whose philosophy and practice don’t align with the *Code* at all! This presents some challenges for public “messaging”.

Youth workers also face another, very different challenge: how to properly leverage the great enthusiasm some community members feel for helping young people. Many people who faced disadvantage in their own youth now aspire to become youth workers, to give back to the community. They can make excellent workers, due to their passion, optimism, lived experience and ability to connect with others. However, it’s essential they can access high quality training, qualifications, work experience, career mentoring and support with things like trauma and English language skills.

Unfortunately, this doesn’t always happen. Due to the proliferation of VET providers (some 100% online) and the community’s loose understanding of what “youth work” means, some aspiring workers have ended up doing inappropriate qualifications and struggling to find a job. This is a particular problem in rural communities, where training options and employment opportunities are relatively rare. As one youth worker said to us recently, “Wanting to ‘do good’ is not enough!”

**Where to from here?**

In March 2018, YACVic launches Youth Work Matters, a campaign to raise the profile of youth work and strengthen community understanding of it as a valued discipline. Youth Work Matters calls on the Victorian Government to increase the number of trained and supported youth workers in our rural, regional and metropolitan communities. We believe this could be achieved through:

1. A state-wide, cross-sector strategy to improve outcomes for young people, especially those facing serious disadvantage. This strategy should draw on lessons from *Positive Pathways for Victoria’s Vulnerable Young People: Vulnerable Youth Framework* (2010). It should be designed in collaboration with local governments, health and community services and Victoria Police. We submit that the strategy must come with funding attached, and its priorities should include:

* Employing an additional 50 youth workers (approx.) for “high-need” groups or locations, based on needs-analyses, priority issues and differing geographical costs of service delivery. (This would be comparable to the approach adopted by the *Vulnerable Youth Framework,* which came with a $22 million package for new youth workers and a rapid response team to work with Victoria Police.)
* A funding pool for rural local councils to employ youth workers, ensuring at least one appropriately trained youth worker operates in each Victorian shire.
* Increased access to specialist youth workers in the fields of mental health, homelessness, and alcohol and other drug support, for communities experiencing high levels of need and barriers to accessing services. These communities should include outer metropolitan “growth” areas and rural and regional areas.
* Appropriately trained youth workers operating from the launch sites of Victoria’s Support and Safety Hubs, in recognition of the vulnerability of young people affected by family violence and the historic lack of specialist support for this cohort.

1. A new initiative to recruit, train and employ youth workers from diverse communities, focused on areas where young people experience high levels of disadvantage, exclusion or crime. In particular, the initiative should prioritise recruitment of youth workers from Aboriginal communities, refugee and migrant communities, and rural and regional communities.

* Work with the providers of Bachelor of Youth Work degrees to launch a new Bachelor level youth work scholarship program for 25 youth workers over 4 years from priority communities, plus cadetship or mentoring opportunities for early-career youth workers from priority communities. Potentially, additional work may be needed to support students from priority communities who started out studying at a Certificate level and wish to move up to this bachelor program.
* Invest in a cultural competence program for all youth workers around the state, designed in collaboration with local communities, the Centre for Multicultural Youth and the Koorie Youth Council.

1. Funded collaborations with local governments and other youth (and allied) services to:

* Increase the number of youth workers in Victorian schools and flexible learning providers, with a focus on strengthening young people’s mental health and wellbeing and preventing school disengagement. Youth workers could support students and their families to access external support services, and work in multidisciplinary teams with other school staff to prevent and address challenging behaviours. There should be a focus on school communities with high levels of identified need per head of population, including rural communities where schools may have very limited access to supports for student wellbeing.
* Create a state-wide youth employment plan, which engages young people and their communities in local discussions about the future of employment, and employs youth workers to assist young people to find, maintain or create employment, including via social enterprises and employer mentoring programs.
* Further develop and strengthen programs that divert young people from crime, help them form positive relationships with Victoria Police, and rehabilitate young people who have offended.

Meanwhile, YACVic will continue to seek out opportunities to:

* Promote the value of youth work, to both the wider community and the leaders of organisations where youth workers operate, including CEOs, senior management and boards of governance.
* Support youth workers to develop this messaging themselves at a local community level and an organisational level.
* Connect experienced youth workers with young people interested in studying youth work, to build their understanding of what is involved in the work and where a youth work qualification can lead.
* Strengthen the career pathways available to youth workers and promote the strength of youth workers as managers.

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