

Inquiry into Youth Mental Health in the ACT

Submission prepared by ReachOut Australia

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Executive summary

Nearly half of all Australians will experience a mental health problem over the course of their lives.¹ Timely and appropriate help-seeking, especially during adolescence, can reduce the long-term health, social and economic impact of many of these mental health problems,² yet studies continue to show that the majority of people experiencing a mental illness don't get the help they need.³ This problem is especially pronounced among young people, with 70 per cent of young people who experience a mental illness receiving no help.⁴

While continued investment in mental health treatment services is a priority and required, what is also required is new investment in early intervention and prevention to increase people's capacity to manage their mental health.

This submission is focused on what is required to create a mental health system orientated to young people with a particular focus on:

- access to online support options that address the barriers to helpseeking

¹ Slade T., Johnston A., Teesson M., Whiteford H., Burgess P., Pirkis J., and Saw S., 2009, *The Mental Health of Australians 2. Report on the 2007 National Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing*, Canberra, Department of Health and Ageing.

² Rickwood D., Deane F.P. and Wilson C., 2007, When and how do young people seek professional help for mental health problems?, *Medical Journal of Australia*, 187:S35-S39.

³ McLennan W., (1998), *Mental Health and Wellbeing: Profile of Adults, Australia 1997*, Canberra, Australian Bureau of Statistics.

⁴ Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2008, *National Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing: Summary of results, 2007*, Cat no 4326.0.

- considering the role on online peer support forums in the broader mental health service system
- enhancing support for parents to help young people experiencing mental health difficulties.

About the inquiry

The Standing Committee on Education, Employment and Youth Affairs has been tasked with conducting an inquiry into youth mental health in the ACT. The ACT inquiry will focus on:

- mental health challenges and the needs of young people in the ACT across the full spectrum from mental distress to enduring psychiatric illness
- ready access to mental health support and services by young people
- identifying roles and responsibilities of the family unit in supporting youth facing mental health and addiction challenges, and supporting families in carrying out these roles
- prevention and early intervention of mental health and addiction strategies
- identifying and responding to young people with mental health and addiction challenges
- youth suicide prevention and support for those close to someone who has taken their own life
- range of services available in ACT schools including counsellors, pastoral care workers, psychologists and other mental health professionals both in schools and within the Directorate
- the extent and availability of mental health first aid training for teachers and learning assistants
- any other relevant matter.

Recommendations

1. **Provide young people with access to online support options that address barriers to helpseeking.**
2. **Consider the role of online peer support forums in the mental health service system, from self-help to more intensive care.**
3. **Accessible and flexible parenting support programs to be integrated into whole-of-school approaches to mental health and wellbeing support and promoted to parents.**

About ReachOut

	National	ACT
Contacts from young people	860,667	13,067
5 most common reasons young people visited ReachOut	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Abuse and violence 2. Anxiety 3. Drugs 4. Work and money 5. Depression 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Abuse and violence 2. Anxiety 3. Drugs 4. Depression 5. Sex

* March to July 2019

ReachOut is the most accessed online mental health service for young people and their parents in Australia. Its trusted self-help information, peer-support program and referral tools save lives by helping young people be well and stay well. The information it offers parents makes it easier for them to help their teenagers, too.

ReachOut has been championing wider access to mental health support since it launched its online service more than 20 years ago. Everything it creates is based on the latest evidence and is designed with experts, and young people or their parents. That's why ReachOut is a trusted, relevant service that's so easy to use.

Accessed by more than 2 million people in Australia each year, ReachOut is a free service that's available anytime and pretty much anywhere.

In 2018-19

- more than 2.6 million Australians visited ReachOut.com
- 13 per cent of service users were at high risk of suicide
- 65,255 young people accessed peer support
- 37,000 young people accessed ReachOut's 'Urgent Help' page
- 570 young people required a duty of care intervention
- 124,691 young people went on to seek additional help
- more than 325,000 parents and carers visited ReachOut Parents.

ReachOut has undertaken a program of research and released a series of reports that explore the social and financial costs of mental ill-health; consider cost-effective solutions for system reform through online service delivery; help better understand young people's mental health and service needs; and demonstrate the impacts of its service. This submission has drawn on the following reports:

- ReachOut and EY, 2015, *A Way Forward: Equipping Australia's Mental Health System for the Next Generation*
- ReachOut Australia, 2016, *ReachOut Parents: Informing a new digital service for parents of teenagers in Australia*
- ReachOut, 2020, *A Measurable Impact: Helping Young People To Be and Stay Well*

These reports, and other research reports, are accessible at <https://about.au.reachout.com/us/our-research/>

ReachOut has a measurable impact

A Measurable Impact: Helping Young People To Be and Stay Well, is a report of an analysis of the largest impact study ReachOut has ever conducted and provided a clear indication of the significant impact ReachOut has on young people in distress⁵. From 2014–16, ReachOut conducted a longitudinal study of approximately 2000 users, to understand how young people use ReachOut, as well as its impact on their mental health and helpseeking behaviour.

The results, which have been independently peer-reviewed, show that over a three-month period ReachOut contributed to a statistically significant decline in symptoms of depression, anxiety and stress. The biggest changes were seen in young people who had severe or extremely severe symptoms.

Users who took part in the study completed multiple surveys over three months. Surveys were conducted at: Baseline, Week 5 (5 weeks post baseline), Follow-up (3 months post baseline). While at the beginning of the study, the majority of users rated their mental health as either 'fair' or 'poor', a large proportion of users (68 per cent) scored in the 'severe' or 'extremely severe' range on symptoms of depression, anxiety and/or stress. Analysis of the data from this study found that ReachOut users experienced:

⁵ Kahl, B.L., Miller, H., Cairns, K., Giniunas, H., Welland, L., and Nicholas., M (2020) *A Measurable Impact: Helping Young People to Be and Stay Well*, Sydney: ReachOut Australia.

1. *Improvements in mental health*: overall ReachOut users participating in this study experienced a significant reduction in their symptoms of depression, anxiety, and stress over the three-month study period, with the largest reduction in symptoms of depression. There was also a reduction in the proportion of participants experiencing severe or extremely severe symptoms of depression, anxiety, and stress.
2. *Reduction in suicide risk*: there was a significant reduction in suicide risk; at baseline 12.3 per cent of users were at high-risk of suicide, but this had significantly reduced to 8.6 per cent of users by the three-month follow-up.
3. *Increased helpseeking*: of those participants who were experiencing symptoms of depression, anxiety, and/or stress, but had not sought help within the three months prior to the study 11.6 per cent went on to seek help from a mental health professional and a further 5.7 per cent went on to seek help from a doctor or GP by the three month follow-up.

The impact of mental ill-health

Half of all mental health disorders emerge by the mid-teens, while 75 per cent have their onset prior to age 25.⁶ Just under one in four adolescents aged 15 to 19 years live with a probable serious mental health illness, and there has been a significant increase in the proportion of young people meeting this criteria over the past five years, rising from 18.7 per cent in 2012 to 22.8 per cent in 2016.⁷

Mental health disorders, such as depression and anxiety, experienced by this age cohort can cause a range of negative effects to wellbeing, functioning and development, both in the short and long term.^{8,9}

Without appropriate support, mental health problems often increase in severity and can lead to social withdrawal, the breakdown of relationships and poor education and employment outcomes.^{10,11} In addition to these significant personal costs, economic analysis estimates the cost to the economy is almost \$70 billion per year, which is approximately 4 per cent of GDP or about \$4,000 for every taxpayer.¹² Between \$6.29 billion¹³ and \$10.6 billion¹⁴ of this cost could be attributed to young people aged 12 to 25.

⁶ Kessler R.C., Amminger G.P., Aguilar-Gaxiolas X., Alonso J., Lee S and Ustun T.B., 2007, "Age on onset of mental disorders: A review of the recent literature", *Current Opinion Psychiatry*, 20(4):359-364.

⁷ Mission Australia, 2017, Youth mental health report: Youth survey 2012–16.

⁸ Scott J., Fowler D., McGorry P., Birchwood M., Killackey E., Christensen H. and Hickie I., 2013, *Adolescents and young adults who are not in employment, education, or training*, BMJ, 347.

⁹ McGorry P.D., Goldstone S.D., Parker A.G., Rickwood D.J., and Hickie I.B., 2014, *Cultures for mental health care of young people: an Australian blueprint for reform*, *The Lancet Psychiatry*, 1 (7), 559-568

¹⁰ Cornaglia F., Crivellaro E. and McNally S., *Mental Health and Education Disorders*, 2012, London: Centre for the Economics of Education, London School of Economics.

¹¹ Olesen S.C., Butterworth P., Leach L.S., Kelaher M. and Pirkis J., 2013, *Mental health affects future employment as job loss affects mental health: Findings from a longitudinal population study*, *BMC Psychiatry*, 13:144.

¹² National Mental Health Commission, 2016, *The Impact of Poor Mental Health – An Economic Issue*, NHMC: Sydney.

¹³ Hosie A., Vogel G., Carden J., Hoddinott J. and Lim S., *A way forward: Equipping Australia's mental health system for the next generation*, 2015, EY and ReachOut Australia.

¹⁴ Access Economics, 2009, *The economic impact of youth mental illness and the cost effectiveness of early intervention*.

Creating a (young) people orientated system

Recommendation:

Provide young people with access to online support options that address barriers to helpseeking.

Preferences for online

The Mission Australia Youth Survey reports illustrates young people's appetite for mental health support that can be provided online¹⁵¹⁶. In their 2018 survey:

- 31 per cent of all young people, and 37 per cent of those with psychological distress, said they would use the internet to source **information about specific issues**
- 16.5 per cent of all young people, and 22.2 per cent of those with psychological distress, said they would use the internet to access **information about available services**
- 16.5 per cent of young people, and 23 per cent of young people with psychological distress, reported that they would use the internet **to chat one-on-one with someone who has had a similar experience** (notably young people valued this over online counselling with a professional)
- 19 per cent of young people, and 19.8 per cent of those with psychological distress, reported they would use the internet to access an **online quiz or assessment tool**
- 8.3 per cent of young people, and 11.8 per cent of those with psychological distress, said they would use an **online support group or forum**.

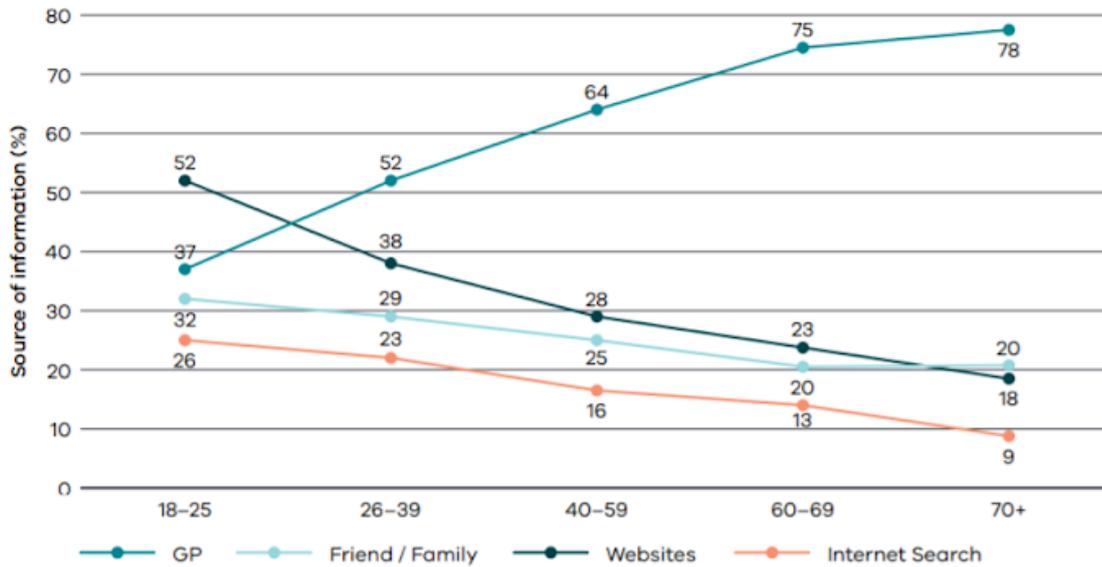
Further the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System noted that children and young people can be reluctant to seek help in person, and many prefer to access support and information online¹⁷. A survey conducted for the Commission found that, while older people are more likely to visit their GP about mental health concerns, young people are more likely to use the websites of specific mental health support services (see Figure 7.23 reproduced from the Interim Report).

¹⁵ S. Hall, J. Fildes, B. Perrens, J. Plummer, E. Carlisle, N. Cockayne and A. Werner-Seidler, 'Can we Talk? Seven Year Youth Mental Health Report - 2012-2018'. Sydney, NSW, Mission Australia, 2019.

¹⁶ E. Carlisle, J. Fildes., S. Hall, B. Perrens, A. Perdriau and J. Plummer, 'Youth Survey Report 2019', Sydney, NSW, Mission Australia, 2019.

¹⁷ State of Victoria, Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System, Interim Report, Parl Paper No. 87 (2018–19)

Figure 7.23: Likely sources of information approach when facing a ‘mental health challenge’, by age group Victoria



Reference: RCVMHS, *Community Sentiment Survey-Key findings*, November 2019.

Help to understand and seek help

The current stepped model of care presumes a level of self-awareness and acceptance of a mental health problem, which is something many young people do not possess and may prevent them from getting appropriate help. A question in ReachOut’s routine monitoring and evaluation, for both ReachOut users and non-ReachOut users, asks ‘What’s the one thing that stresses you out, but you don’t think is important or serious enough to tell anyone?’. While many young people report issues like study stress and worrying about the future, others report issues that signal fairly serious mental health symptoms which they are not conceptualising in this way, or seeing as help worthy (see Table 1).

Table 1: “What’s the one thing that stresses you out, but you don’t think is important or serious enough to tell anyone?”

<i>Responses that may signal mental health symptoms</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anxiety • A feeling of hopelessness • Being worthless • Eating disorders • I am worried too much about everything • I feel extremely sad deep inside • Just general negative feelings about myself and my life • My social anxiety I feel like it’s silly and other people don’t get it like it’s just something I need to get over on my own

Young people need help to understand what they are going through and to get them ready to seek further support. Services like ReachOut provide this opportunity by:

- increasing awareness of symptoms and services
- providing a safe space to explore and discuss their situation
- clarifying expectations about what seeking help would look like, what would be required of them and how much it would cost
- building positive attitudes about the benefits of seeking help and decreasing stigma
- sharing other young people's experiences of seeking help
- increasing a young person's sense of agency and motivation in their own helpseeking journey.

ReachOut NextStep, launched in 2016, is an evidence-based automated triaging tool designed to build service readiness and link young people to the services that are most appropriate for their level of need. NextStep is available on ReachOut.com and has been developed as a 'widget' that can be syndicated and incorporated into other online settings, such as The University of Melbourne website.

The NextStep development drew on the expertise of 10 leading mental health service providers and was co-designed with more than 600 young people. A randomised control trial found it to be effective in reducing negative affect and improving satisfaction with the helpseeking process up to three months after using the tool, when compared with usual helpseeking strategies¹⁸. The economic analysis also demonstrated that the tool is cost effective, better matching health interventions with the needs and preferences of consumers¹⁹. Expansion of a tool like NextStep could play an important role in facilitating the principles of stepped care in an efficient and cost-effective way for young people, and reducing costs in the broader health system.

Online platforms like ReachOut can support young people to become more self-aware in relation to their own mental health, and empower them to access the form of support that is right for them.

The reluctant helpseeker

ReachOut's research and work with young people has shown that a large proportion are unwilling to access face-to-face services, even if they know that they would benefit from doing so. A Mission Australia report showed that 36.5 per cent of the young people surveyed who were experiencing psychological distress agreed with the statement "I have had some problems but I did not get help even though I thought I needed it"²⁰. ReachOut's recent impact study, *A Measurable Impact: Helping Young People to Be and Stay Well*, showed that 26.6 per cent of respondents (comprising young people with fairly significant mental health needs) agreed with the same statement²¹.

"I don't think it is necessary [sic] to tell anyone because i know how to solve my problems and i dont need to bother anyone else about them" [ReachOut study participant]

¹⁸ L.K. Le, L. Sanci, M.L. Chatterton, S. Kauer, K. Buhagiar and C. Mihalopoulos, 'The Cost-Effectiveness of an Internet Intervention to Facilitate Mental Health Help-Seeking by Young Adults: Randomized Controlled Trial', *Journal of medical internet research*, vol. 21, no. 7, 2019, pp. 1-12, doi: 10.2196/13065.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ S. Hall, J. Fildes, B. Perrens, J. Plummer, E. Carlisle, N. Cockayne and A. Werner-Seidler, 'Can we Talk? Seven Year Youth Mental Health Report - 2012-2018'. Sydney, NSW, Mission Australia, 2019.

²¹ Kahl, B.L., Miller, H., Cairns, K., Giniunas, H., Welland, L., and Nicholas., M (2020) *A Measurable Impact: Helping Young People to Be and Stay Well*, Sydney: ReachOut Australia.

It is well established that young people are often reluctant to seek help for mental health problems²², with the main barriers to helpseeking being stigma, embarrassment and preference for self-reliance²³. A 2014 review identified that although young people's experiences of online mental health services are typically very positive, to date there has been little evidence to suggest they facilitate helpseeking²⁴. It is therefore encouraging that ReachOut's recent impact study showed it contributed to an increase in helpseeking intentions and behaviours²⁵. This highlights the considerable potential of services like ReachOut to mitigate common barriers to helpseeking.

The impact study of approximately 2000 ReachOut users, also showed the service attracted young people with fairly significant mental health needs, and that many had previously sought help from a mental health professional. Of concern is that many did not rate this experience as helpful. It was encouraging that this cohort of young people with unmet needs had experienced improvements in their mental health symptoms after engaging with ReachOut, and rated the support they received positively. While ReachOut is primarily intended as a prevention/early intervention service, it is supporting young people across the spectrum of intervention and all the way through their mental health journey.

Finally, ReachOut's impact study demonstrated that although many young people intended to seek help from a mental health professional, they more frequently relied on friends, parents and online resources. Mission Australia reports similar findings, with friends, parents/caregivers and the internet being the most commonly cited sources of support²⁶. This highlights the reliance on online resources, but speaks to the importance of services which offer resources and support to people, such as friends or parents, who may find themselves providing informal support to a young person.

The potential of online peer support communities

Recommendation:

Consider the role of online peer support forums in the mental health service system, from self-help to more intensive care.

Peer support is increasingly recognised as an important component of the mental health service system, due to increasing demand for this type of support and demonstration of its unique impact and effectiveness. Online peer support communities (or forums) are embedded within a number of services in Australia, for example, ReachOut, Beyond Blue and SANE. Each forum has a similar model, but caters to different consumers.

²² Rickwood, D. J., Deane, F. P., & Wilson, C. J. (2007). When and how do young people seek professional help for mental health problems? *Medical Journal of Australia*, 187(S7), S35–S39. <https://doi.org/10.5694/j.1326-5377.2007.tb01334.x>

²³ Gulliver, A., Griffiths, K. M., & Christensen, H. (2010). Perceived barriers and facilitators to mental health help-seeking in young people: A systematic review. *BMC Psychiatry*, 10(1), 113. <https://doi.org/10.1186/1471-244X-10-113>

²⁴ Kauer, S. D., Mangan, C., & Sancj, L. (2014). Do online mental health services improve help-seeking for young people? A systematic review. *Journal of Medical Internet Research*, 16(3), e66. <https://doi.org/10.2196/jmir.3103>

²⁵ Kahl, B.L., Miller, H., Cairns, K., Giniunas, H., Welland, L., and Nicholas., M (2020) *A Measurable Impact: Helping Young People to Be and Stay Well*, Sydney: ReachOut Australia.

²⁶ S. Hall, J. Fildes, B. Perrons, J. Plummer, E. Carlisle, N. Cockayne and A. Werner-Seidler, 'Can we Talk? Seven Year Youth Mental Health Report - 2012-2018'. Sydney, NSW, Mission Australia, 2019.

Peer support is often conceptualised as providing social and emotional support throughout recovery. ReachOut's research and evaluation of its peer support forums shows that it plays an important role throughout the stepped model of care, and even before a young person interacts with the formal mental health system. ReachOut has found that young people use peer support to contextualise what is going on for them, explore what their options are, help manage stress and distress, build their readiness to reach out for more formal support where needed, and as an adjunct to treatment. Further, a substantial number of young people do not post, but are reassured and feel less alone as a result of reading the posts made by other young people and the responses from peer and (less frequently) staff moderators.

The majority of young people accessing ReachOut's forums are affected by poor mental health, and are commonly experiencing feelings of low self-esteem, loneliness and isolation. Some struggle to navigate and maintain close relationships. There is also a reluctance to seek help from a mental health professional within this community. In 2018-19, 570 young people using ReachOut's peer support forums required a duty of care intervention, the majority related to suicide ideation or attempt. ReachOut's research with forum users has demonstrated the benefits of online peer support in terms of providing social connection, validating concerns, generating a sense of hope and increasing uptake of self-help strategies.

Supporting young people during the school years

Recommendation:

Accessible and flexible parenting support programs to be integrated into whole-of-school approaches to mental health and wellbeing support and promoted to parents.

Parents and carers are an important source of informal support for young people and in helping them to navigate mental health difficulties and facilitating timely and appropriate support. The Mission Australia Youth Survey Report 2018 asked young people to indicate where they would go for help with important issues in their lives. The top three sources of help for young people were friend/s, parent/s or guardian/s and relative/family friend (83 per cent, 75.2 per cent and 57.6 per cent respectively).²⁷

Anecdotally, we know that parenting today is a lot more complex. This generation of parents of teenagers is the first to have to deal with issues such as their children's social media use, cyberbullying and when their child should get their first mobile phone. They are also very time-poor, and are increasingly turning to the internet for information and advice.

As part of the content and design research conducted by ReachOut to develop the ReachOut Parents service²⁸, parents identified their top concerns about their teenagers as: communicating with their teenager, peer pressure, education and study stress, anxiety, drugs, alcohol and smoking, bullying and social media and technology use.

Parents also identified the major barriers to accessing help including:

- a lack of resources – financial and transport.
- not knowing where to get help
- stigma

²⁷ Mission Australia, 2019, Youth Survey Report 2019

²⁸ ReachOut Australia, 2016, ReachOut Parents: Informing a new digital service for parents of teenagers in Australia, available at: https://about.au.reachout.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/ReachOut-Parents_Research-Summary.pdf

- changing world and feeling ill equipped to deal with it, particularly in relation to technology, bullying, and school and university pressures
- past experiences with services
- racism and discrimination
- young person not wanting to be helped, or not believing that their parents are able to help them.

Parents need to be equipped with the skills, knowledge and confidence to provide information, support and, where appropriate, referrals to professional support. Acknowledging that parents and carers live busy lives, the provision of information and support should be flexible and integrated into settings where they spend time e.g. online and schools.

ReachOut Parents, launched in 2016, was accessed by more than 300,000 parents in 2018-19, and provides evidence-based information, resources, peer support and one-on-one telephone support for parents and young people aged 12-18 years. It is:

- Free and accessible. Available 24/7, ReachOut's mobile-first design and AA accessibility rating mean time-poor parents can access information where and when they need it.
- Co-designed with parents and young people. More than 1100 parents from across Australia helped ReachOut design and build the service, and young people were also consulted to ensure the service met their needs.
- Offers one-on-one support. Free and confidential support over the phone and online. A professional who is experienced in supporting families assists parents to create an action plan that works for them.

ReachOut Parents one-on-one support has received a 100 per cent positive satisfaction rating from parents. While the majority of parents who have used the service are mothers, there have been equal proportions of males and females as the focus child, showing that this is an effective way of reaching young men that tend to be challenging to reach through traditional models. Integration of this model into the education system (via schools) will likely fill a gap in the service system for parents and support improved outcomes for adolescent mental health.

Conclusion

This submission has focused on opportunities, as part of the ACT Inquiry into Youth Mental Health, to create a mental health system that is orientated towards young people – that takes into account their preferences for online services and helpseeking behaviours. It also looks at opportunities to help more young people through online peer support, and by better equipping the people they turn to for support, parents and carers.

In addition to the priority to invest in traditional mental health treatment services, there is an opportunity to look at additional investment in early intervention and prevention. In this way we can increase people's capacity to manage their mental health, and before the first onset of the symptoms, and to prevent mental health issues.

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