

ASF REPORT
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VOICES FROM THE STREET: STORYTELLING AMONG PEOPLE EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS

SUMMARY:

Our project centers on the belief that people experiencing homelessness are our best teachers and should be included in work addressing the health disparities and root causes of housing insecurity including unaffordable housing, racial inequity, non-livable wages, and lack of access to substance use and mental health services. We conducted narrative storytelling workshops among people experiencing homelessness in southeast Michigan with multiple synergistic aims: to improve mental health and access to mental healthcare services; build community and trust; and provide an advocacy outlet by elevating these experiences, in the form of digital and printed published stories, written by community members experiencing homelessness.

Over the course of our Albert Schweitzer Fellowship (ASF), we conducted 5 in-person writing workshops with 28 total participants. Some of our participants indicated an interest in sharing their stories, and 7 individuals have documented their written narrative. We also connected 9 people with social services to improve their socio-emotional wellbeing (e.g. cell phone assistance, transportation to medical appointments, etc.). We are currently in collaboration with Groundcover News (a print newspaper that publishes stories written by people experiencing housing insecurity and for which proceeds of newspaper sales provide income for people experiencing homelessness who sell the papers) and Auxocardia (online

humanities medical journal at the University of Michigan) with the goal of sharing these stories with our academic and local communities to advocate and elevate the voices of people experiencing homelessness.

The sustainability of our work will be through dissemination of the stories; sharing our work through presentations (University of Michigan Medical School Capstone for Impact Symposium and Gold Humanism Foundation Conference) to further elevate these voices among health professionals; and through incorporating the stories within the “Healthcare for the Homeless” clinical elective course for medical students and the Wolverine Street Medicine website at the University of Michigan. Overall, facilitating writing groups and forming meaningful connections with the people we have met over the course of this experience has profoundly impacted our lives. We have learned far more about grace, resiliency, injustices, kindness, overcoming “boulders,” the value of reflection, and working on teams as ASF fellows than we could ever have imagined.

PROJECT OVERVIEW AND GOALS

During the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, we served as volunteers at the Shelter Association of Washtenaw County’s rotating shelters at various community churches in Ann Arbor. Over time, we established trust and built positive relationships with both the staff and community members experiencing homelessness. We were fortunate enough to informally lead writing exercises and to be on the receiving end of powerful narratives shared with us by members of our community experiencing homelessness during the COVID-19 quarantine. It is out of these experiences that the ideas for this project were formed and for which we applied to be Albert Schweitzer Fellows.

Narrative exercises and storytelling may reduce symptoms of depression and build feelings of resilience, self-esteem, and community connectedness (Armstrong 2017; Bornat 1989; Hallford and Mellor 2013). Engagement in artistic activities such as writing can enhance mood (Graham et al. 2008), develop a capacity for self-reflection, heal emotional injuries, build confidence (Hellum, Jensen, and Nielsen 2017), and increase understanding of oneself and others (Stuckey and Nobel 2010). Importantly, there is a disproportionate number of people experiencing homelessness with mental health and substance use disorders who are not in treatment (Center for Substance Abuse Treatment 2013). According to the most recent data, it is estimated that in Michigan over 40% of people experiencing homelessness have both a mental health and physical health diagnosis. It is also well documented that people experiencing homelessness experience a perceived sense of unwelcomeness and discrimination by the healthcare system (Wen et al. 2007); which is worrisome, as it may contribute to one of the many barriers people experiencing homelessness face when attempting to access needed healthcare.

Our project aimed to:

- Engage in storytelling, through writing, photography, and video, with people experiencing homelessness to foster improved mental health symptoms. We aimed to do so through group writing workshops as well as individual story telling sessions
(Individual-level)
- Connect our participants with health or social services they may need as we are able facilitate access to needed medical care **(Individual-level)**

- Amplify advocacy about housing insecurity at the community level by supporting existing community based writing and advocacy efforts (**Community-level**)
- Increase humanistic practice among healthcare providers towards people experiencing housing insecurity by sharing these stories within the University of Michigan medical community (**Health systems level**)

We intended to create a written and virtual anthology of narratives written by the storytelling workshop participants. Additionally, we would seek narrative feedback from the participants regarding their experience. We would record the number of health and social services referrals made, as well. This project pertains to our future goals as physicians dedicated to service and advocacy alongside marginalized populations, most especially patients experiencing homelessness.

APPROACH & PROCESS

We spent a significant amount of time engaging with stakeholders and carefully planning the content of the writing workshops as well as the best space and method of conducting these workshops. After conducting a thorough literature search, we reached out to Drs. Zhang and Hawa who had completed a similar project in Canada where they conducted a series of literary workshops in a homeless shelter (Zhang and Hawa 2018). Dr. Hawa met with us and was able to provide insights and guidance, such as methods for engaging our population and ways to think about service and sustainability. We drafted writing workshop modules and prompts, which we shared with our academic mentors and community members with lived experiences of homelessness to get their feedback. We piloted the writing workshop prompts

with 2 individuals with lived experiences of homelessness. We attended a variety of community gatherings among people experiencing housing insecurity to find the best space to conduct our writing groups. This was very important to us as “space and place” matter in terms of creating an environment conducive to think and to share, ensuring participants felt safe and comfortable. Ultimately, we found that the Delonis shelter in Ann Arbor had the space to support our efforts. Conducting our writing workshops during Sunday mornings in the winter filled a need in our community, because there were no programmatic activities occurring at this time, and people were clustered inside given the inclement weather.

We developed a protocol including safety measures, ground rules for the workshop, and lists of writing prompts (see appendix). During the writing groups, we set up our space (organized chairs, laid out snacks, etc.). We then individually invited shelter guests to participate as well as made an announcement in the common spaces (e.g. cafeteria). People gathered and we introduced ourselves, our project’s goals, and provided supplies (e.g., journals, pens, disposable cameras, snacks, socks, hats, etc.). We read a few writing prompts to spark ideas. We provided quiet space for writing as well as support for participants as needed. We wrapped up the writing workshops by opening the space for participants to share their creative processes as well as provide feedback to us on how the session went.

When meeting with people individually, we met at local coffee shops and libraries, and with participant consent, audio-recorded their oration of their story as well as took photographs. We transcribed the audio-recordings and met with participants to clarify parts of their story, share the write-up, and obtain their feedback (e.g., parts they wanted to omit, areas

they wanted to highlight more, etc.). Participants signed a disclosure form if they were interested in sharing their story and received compensation for their time.

We are currently working with 2 media outlets to sustainably disseminate these stories, support advocacy efforts within the Southeast Michigan homeless community, and elevate the voices of people experiencing housing insecurity, with a particular emphasis on their interactions with the healthcare system. We are collaborating with both Groundcover News (a print newspaper that publishes stories written by people experiencing housing insecurity and for which proceeds of newspaper sales provide income for people with lived experiences of homelessness who sell the papers) and Auxocardia (online humanities medical journal at the University of Michigan) to publish the individual stories online and in print. In addition, these stories will be included in the University of Michigan Medical School's Healthcare for the Homeless clinical elective, which will allow students to engage with voices they often are not exposed to within the medical school curriculum.

OUTCOMES

Over the course of our Albert Schweitzer Fellowship, we conducted 5 in-person writing groups. Participants engaged in the writing groups in such unique ways, including some who wrote about their experiences with homelessness; others needed help starting their resumes; others drew and designed fashion pieces; and another person made a word constellation in response to the prompts. We met with 7 individuals who were interested in further documenting their stories multiple times to craft their narratives. We linked 5 people to social

services (e.g., mental health referrals, support finding social services such as telephone, food, etc.).

While the full stories are pending publication in Groundcover News and Auxocardia, representative quotations and photographs include:

- From David who has been a huge advocate for people experiencing homelessness and took part in Camp Take Notice (a self-governing, grassroots tent community of people experiencing homelessness located in Ann Arbor. The camp offered an “alternative approach to the traditional government and private systems that provide shelter and basic resources for the homeless. Camp Take Notice’s emphasis on community among camp members and faith-based organizations is what set it apart from other services.” It was disbanded by the Michigan Department of Transportation in 2012):

“I was working, and one of my friends was staying at Camp Take Notice. I went to visit him one day; there were 10 people living there at the time. He told me that this was a nice spot. They provide tents and a sleeping bag. He told me if I ever needed a place to go, I could come down here.

Two weeks later I lost my job...And so I stayed at the camp although I knew I couldn’t stay there forever. No one knew it was there, but somehow the news found out. The Ann Arbor news. TV stations. They wanted to interview people. So, Peggy [Camp Take Notice supporter] found me and said, ‘I want you to speak for the camp. I want you to say some words.’ So, I spoke with the news and at some city council meetings to tell them about the homeless here in America. I will never forget that I was so nervous... I told the council that any one of us can become homeless. I don’t understand why we are the richest country in the world, yet we have

homelessness here in America. We would rather throw food away than give it to someone who really needs it. We would rather spend billions of dollars trying to go to space when we could be taking care of the homeless. If we took care of people here in America, we would have no problem helping the rest of the world. But how can we help the rest of the world, if we cannot take care of the people over here?"



- From Gary who we met at the temporary warming shelters and was a source of much humor and has a huge, caring spirit for his friends and family:

"My wife Donna was on Section 8 [HUD housing voucher program]. After she passed, my son Tim and I were evicted from her apartment. The apartment was not in my or Tim's names, and Donna and I hadn't legally married. Then, from what I hear, they had a garage sale on the front lawn of all our stuff. You wouldn't believe the stuff I left there.

Tim stayed with his girlfriend, and I went to crash at Delonis. But, back then, Delonis used to require a breathalyzer test upon entry. If you blew numbers, they would not let you in. I always blew numbers, so I ended up sleeping in the park most of the time.”

...

“A couple years ago I started the tradition of releasing two balloons into the sky on the day Donna died. I signed my name and Tim’s on the balloons. I whispered to her “we love you; we miss you,” then let the balloons go. I watched the two balloons drift up into the clouds.

I know Donna is in Heaven; so, I cannot screw up anymore. She ain’t gonna meet me in Hell, and I want to be back with her. We were together for 35 years, and believe me, I miss her so much. There is not a day that goes by that I don’t think about her.”

- From Gracie, who is the house manager at Mercy House and is an incredible leader, empathetic spirit, and change agent (dubbed by us as the “mayor” of the housing insecure):

”Looking back ... I felt different than everyone else at school. Even though, I was bullied, and I was made fun of ...looking back, the reason was because I was different. And whatever that difference was, now I can realize it, right? The difference was, I was not the person matching my body. When I was a teenager, I realized that I wanted to be a parent because I had this enormous amount of desire to provide a child all the things I didn’t get. I felt like, as a neglected child, there are different ends of the spectrum – you’re either going to continue the neglect, continue being an abusive parent or you have an enormous desire to be different from what you were given. And that was me. I wanted to be a parent to 30 kids and make their lives so much better. I think of the humans that I have come into contact with as all of that. I realized ‘a

kid' is just an age. There is no limit on their need to be shown something different from what they're used to.

I was always hunting for people to be empathetic towards me...the outcast, the most vulnerable, the most colorful person, I was attracted to them, and they were attracted to me. I felt good making someone feel good about themselves.”

- From Daniel, our friend from the Delonis warming centers who loves to cook and has experienced both housing insecurity and substance use disorder, yet continues to be one of the most caring and kind people we know:

“I walked to the emergency room because my arm had swelled up. I had gotten a needle stuck in my arm a couple days before when I was using. I didn't want to go [to the hospital]; I was so embarrassed.

A nurse—I don't know where she was from or if she knew I was Hispanic or nothing, but all she did was talk about how the Mexicans got away with this and got away with thatI almost said that you need to shut the f up, don't you know I am 100% Mexican? And it was humiliating because the first thing the medical team asked was, 'how did you get the needle stuck in your arm?' Umm duh? Could you say it any freaking louder? Everyone could hear everything through those hospital curtains.

Then my doctor came in and scolded me like crazy. He said stuff like 'Aren't you too old to be using drugs?' and stuff like that. I bit my tongue and took a good ass chewing. I talked to my nurse and told her I did not want that doctor to return to my room otherwise I would kick him out. I never saw him again during the week I was in the hospital. I needed surgery to remove the needle and IV antibiotics for the bacteria in my blood.”

- From our friend Dusdee who immigrated to the United States and participated in our writing group. She recently got an apartment and has so kindly invited us into her home and showered us in blessings:

“The car ran over me. I had been walking on the street with an Austrian man. It was December, and I had just turned 25. The German guy who was driving—he was drunk.

When I was on my back with the tire on top of me—my mind whispered, ‘Shiva [Deity in Hinduism/Buddhism], the tire is coming for my head!’ The first tire had already missed, running over my leg and back. The other tire was coming—my mind screamed: ‘Shiva, Shiva, what can I do?’ He told me to move my head to the left side. The second tire also missed.

Shiva tried to help me. He sent me to sleep, but my ears still listened. I was taken to the hospital. They checked X-rays—nothing was broken. No bones, no bleeding—nothing! I had a small scab, but that was all!”



Furthermore, we built strong relationships with important members of the Southeast Michigan homeless advocacy community. We continued to work with the Shelter Association of

Washtenaw County's Delonis shelter. We built a partnership with Mission Ann Arbor, a non-profit that runs Mercy House and Purple House (hospitality houses that follow a Dorothy Day charity model) that our partner student organization Wolverine Street Medicine will be able to continue to serve in the future. Most importantly, we have heard stories and made friends that will last a lifetime.

EVALUATION

Our sustainability will be measured by publishing our stories in *Groundcover News* and *Auxocardia* to amplify the voices throughout our local and medical community. Sustainability will be further achieved by story inclusion within the University of Michigan Healthcare for the Homeless clinical elective, which will allow students to engage and reflect on these narratives and how to become more humanistic providers focused on understanding the unique mental health, substance use, and other needs of people who have experienced housing insecurity.

In addition, we have shared our work with professional academic societies to primarily elevate the voices of people we have met, as well as promote humanistic care towards this population by healthcare professionals. We presented a poster at the virtual University of Michigan Medical School Capstone for Impact Showcase on April 8, 2022. Voted by our peers, we received the Capstone for Impact Poster Award for highest scoring poster. In addition, we will be presenting our results at the Arnold P. Gold Foundation "Healing the Heart of Healthcare" conference in May 2022.

What cannot be fully quantified is the value of the people we met, the relationships we built, and holding space to hear these stories and narratives. The stories and experiences

shared with us were beautiful, painful, and heart wrenching. They were filled with resiliency, grace, and a persistent kindness in the face of an often cruel and judgmental world. We will call on their stories throughout our medical career, for they have surely changed our perspectives as soon-to-be physicians.

REFLECTION

Boulders

One of the best lessons we learned from the Albert Schweitzer Fellowship was how to recognize, hold space for, and overcome “boulders.” We faced many challenges. For example, when we were about to start our pilot writing workshops, one of the people who had wanted to pilot with us had a medical crisis. We went from trying to coordinate a pilot session to supporting this friend in their time of medical need. We also needed to keep our project moving forward and had to create an alternative path to pilot our writing workshop prompts, which we did by providing prompts to 2 individuals with lived experiences of homelessness who kindly shared feedback with us.

Respect & Growth

We both value respecting people as foundational to our essence. We recognized we were walking into a space and a community that we were not necessarily members of. We wanted to build trust and get to know people. Eventually, we had to plunge in. We learned that if we approached our workshops with kindness and respect, people would feel that and we would build our trust and community through the writing workshops (rather than a priori). For Sarah,

a huge introvert, this involved stepping out of her comfort zone and being a bit bolder than normal. For Ruth, this involved stepping out of her comfort zone as well (most notably, announcing the storytelling workshops to a boisterous room of people at the Delonis Center). She also learned that in valuing and respecting people as foundational to our work, that often opposed our timetable. Flexibility, patience, and recognition that people's priorities are understandably different from ours were other beneficial learning experiences.

Teamwork

Ruth and Sarah both have busy full-time graduate schedules in addition to undergoing the residency application process to find a resident physician job. Sarah learned so much about how to lead and contribute to a team through Ruth's patience, kindness, and guiding force. For Ruth, Sarah taught her the importance of diving deep into the meaning of words and ideas, which was especially critical in the initial conceptualization of the writing workshop prompts. She also was invaluable in helping direct conversations with storytelling participants and keeping Ruth on track, who is easily able to get sucked down rabbit holes.

We were able to balance the ebbs and flows of our schedule to drive our project forward. We were malleable to the changes that arose such as scheduling conflicts. We had a strong mentorship team that offered dynamic advice and feedback.

Importance of Reflection

Our monthly reflections for the ASF program offered a space for us to reflect on this process and were invaluable for us. We also learned a lot from each other's reflection. Car rides to our

different service endeavors also allowed us the space to reflect and learn from each other's perspective. Our quarterly meetings with our faculty adviser, Dr. Brent Williams, also provided an important space for us to engage and reflect on humanism in medicine.

APPENDIX

SAFETY PROTOCOL

- Safety is the highest priority.
- Masks will be required at all times during the sessions. If food or beverages are provided, it is okay to take masks off to eat and drink. We will provide hand sanitizer/cleaning supplies to ensure we minimize risks. We will also ensure we have a space to support adequate social distancing.
- All discussions during the writing workshops will be confidential unless a participant expresses (either verbally or through their writing) that they will harm themselves or others.
 - If this occurs, one of the group leaders will assess the situation.
 - If there is immediate harm/risk, 911 will be contacted immediately.
 - If passive/no immediate threat, will triage and ensure the participant has appropriate follow up care.
 - All occurrences will be documented by email explaining the situation and outcome to the site director/contact.
- No drugs or alcohol during writing workshops.
- Hurtful and harmful language will not be tolerated. We expect that everyone demonstrates respect for everyone in our workshops.

SITE CONTACT INFORMATION

Dan Kelly
Delonis Center



Daniel Kelly

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STEPS/LOGISTICS

1. Arrive early (~30 minutes before). Set up space.
 - a. Chairs/cushions
 - b. Food/Snacks (waters, healthy snacks, hand warmers/socks, naran)

- c. Hand sanitizer/Cleaning supplies
 - d. Writing workshop materials (pens, journals, cameras)
- 2. Have copies of release form ready
- 3. Read through welcome/introduction. (5-10 min)
- 4. Short introduction with names. "What you like to be called?" (5 min)
- 5. Review Ground Rules [see if participant would want to read]
- 6. Moment of breathing/stretching. Quick meditation section (1-2 min)
 - a. **What do you hope to gain from today?**
- 7. Walk through writing prompts
- 8. Free writing time (30-45 minutes)
- 9. Option to share with group (20-30 minutes)
- 10. Thank everyone for sharing
- 11. Anyone have feedback? (evaluative component)
 - a. **Did you gain what you hoped for today? Why or why not?**
 - b. **What went well for you today/what did you like?**
 - c. **What did not go so well/what did you not like?**
 - d. **Anything we can help you with?**
- 12. Pass out Release Forms to interested folks if interested in sharing their stories. Also offer publishing/editing services to those interested.
- 13. Stay around for anyone with questions/talk with folks.
- 14. Clean up space.
- 15. Record # of participants, # of health referrals.
- 16. Debrief how session went:
 - a. Needed supplies
 - b. Ways to improve?

WELCOME/INTRODUCTION TO STORYTELLING WORKSHOP

Welcome to the "SHARE YOUR STORY" Storytelling and PhotoVoice Workshop! Our names are Ruth Bishop and Sarah Jabour, and we are both medical students at the University of Michigan working with the health outreach organization, Wolverine Street Medicine. You may have met us or members of our team, who provide medical services at the Delonis clinic.

We are so grateful to meet you and to share this experience with you. We would first like to share how this came to be. During the pandemic we became friends with many people staying at the warming centers. We loved hearing their stories! Some of our friends wrote poetry, others told us about their work advocating for housing rights, and some of our other friends wanted to write their stories down. They expressed their interest in having their stories shared within the community.

We have created several different writing workshops with the goals to 1: create a safe space for you to be heard and to share your story, 2: Promote well-being and mental health and 3: Reduce stigma surrounding people who are unhoused within our community.

We tell stories through both words and pictures. For those of you wanting to use writing, we have free journals and writing supplies. For those of you wanting to tell your story through photographs, we also have disposable cameras available. You are welcome to try both.

You are welcome to participate in as many or as few of our writing sessions as you would like. You can stay for as long or as short of a time as you like.

There is an option for you to have your story/photographs shared in a book and/or online format. This is completely optional and is your decision. Together we will put together the stories and publish them to share at local venues like the public library. We hope that by sharing your stories we can show how amazing this community truly is and use your voice to improve social services to people who are unhoused and improve the healthcare systems. We will provide more information about this at the end of the writing sessions, and feel free to ask us questions for more information.

Our goal is to form a community, to make friends, and to listen and learn from each other's experience. We hope everyone feels safe and comfortable here. Before we get started, we first wanted to review some ground rules:

- The most important rule is Respect. Respect each of us in this community, respect yourself, and respect our stories and journeys. This means that we treat others the way we want to be treated and listen respectfully when others are speaking. Do not move around or read while people are sharing their stories.
- Everything we discuss will be confidential—stories will not be shared outside of this workshop. Please respect the privacy of the stories you hear by not sharing them without permission.
- Everyone has the opportunity to share and participate, but there is no pressure to do so. There is no “right or wrong” way to share your story or participate in this workshop.

Any questions? Thank You!

[After introductions, briefly review the general rules again and review writing prompts. Remind them that at the end, during the last 20-30 min, they can share their story.]

SHARE YOUR STORY WORKSHOP PROMPTS

GROUND RULES:

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we want to be treated and listen respectfully when others are speaking. We will not move around or read while others are sharing their stories.

- Everything we discuss will be confidential—we will not share stories outside of this space. We will respect the privacy of the stories heard by not sharing them without permission.
- Everyone has the opportunity to share and participate, but there is no pressure to do so. There is no “right or wrong” way to share our story or participate in this workshop.

WRITING PROMPTS:

Telling Your Story

“Nobody can tell your story the way you can tell your story.” –Danielle Laporte

These prompts are all about who you ARE. How you got to this point. We each have a unique story—what is yours?

- Tell me your story. Who are you?
- Where are you from?
- Where are you going?
 - What are your hopes and dreams for the future?
 - What do you need to make that happen?
- What is the story of your name? How did you get your name? What does it mean to you?
- How did you get to where you are?
 - What emotions does that evoke for you?
- How did you become “homeless?”
- What does it mean to “persevere?”
- Write a poem of your story.

Talking about your people

“Some people come into your life as blessings. Some come into our lives as lessons.” –Mother Teresa

We all have people in our life who – for better or for worse – have impacted us in some way. Some have had big influences on our lives, both good and bad. The focus of these questions is about our communities and the people in our lives.

- Write about a time people showed up for you or a time you felt supported.
- Write about a time people did not show up for you or a time when you did not feel supported.
- How have your relationships with others changed over time?
 - Grown?

- People who you have lost?
- What does the word 'community' mean to you?
- What are the elements (for example, trust) that make a community? Ho
 - How can 'community' be created?
- Where do you feel like you belong or 'at home'?
 - If you do not feel like you belong anywhere—why do you feel that way?
- Describe the landscape of housing insecurity in Michigan.
 - How do the shelters you have been in Ann Arbor differ from Detroit or other places in Michigan?
- What is staying at a warming center (Purple House, Delonis) like?

What I Wish People Knew

The focus of these prompts is on what we wish people knew about our lives and stories. Often, we see people and make quick judgments and assumptions about who someone is without ever talking to them or hearing their story.

- What do you wish people knew about being “homeless?”
- How would you prefer the term “homeless” be called? What do you feel like is the thing that people most misunderstand about you?
 - About your housing situation?
- What do you wish people knew about living with _____ (mental illness, addiction, etc)
- How do healthcare providers/doctors treat you?
 - Have you ever been treated badly by a healthcare provider. If so—what happened?
 - Conversely, have you ever been treated really well by a healthcare provider? If so—what happened?
 - What do you wish healthcare providers knew about you and your situation?
- What do you wish policy makers/government knew about your situation?
- What do you wish people in our local community knew about you?
- Write about a time you felt seen by others.
- Conversely, write about a time you felt dismissed/ignored/invisible by others.
- If you could tell a stranger anything about you, what would you say and why?

Qualitative Feedback about session:

Additional data being collected includes number of participants, social service/health referrals, and participants' qualitative feedback on the workshop and its benefits.

1. Did you gain what you hoped for today? Why or why not?
2. What went well for you today/what did you like?
3. What did not go so well/what did you not like?
4. Anything we can help you with?

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