

Policy on the Rock

Together Reducing Poverty



Policy on the Rock is an annual gathering for people of all backgrounds – from government, nonprofits and those living in low income neighbourhoods. The aim this year was to facilitate a discussion between participants with a focus on recognizing the day to day hurdles of those living in poverty and to develop solutions to these problems.

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Figure 1, Policy on the Rock. June, 2018

Introduction

The Community Sector Council and Vibrant Communities' *Policy on the Rock* gathering has a reputation for truth telling. Those who gather identify policies that are working well and should be strengthened as well as inefficient policies and systems that cause people to stumble which need to shift and change. The commitment to gather people with lived experience, service providers, government workers and volunteers assures a well-rounded perspective and a chance to share thoughts and ideas which deepen our understanding of issues.

Policy on the Rock 2018 aimed to focus less on big picture issues and focus particularly on day-to-day policy and people needs that might be easily changed. These more straightforward changes were framed as *Rocks* that can be moved. However, it is very difficult during discussion to steer away from those fundamental big picture perspectives because they influence the smaller day-to-day issues. These bigger picture issues were framed as *Boulders* (very big rocks) that need to be moved to get better outcomes, but clearly take the sustained effort of major governments and policy makers over time.

Discussion tables were set for Housing, Income/Financial, Transportation, Education, Health and Other. The Other Table was a space where people could talk about issues they were passionate about and wanted to have noted.

While there were participants from various parts of the island, the discussion focus tended to be rooted in the metro St. John's experience. The main priorities, for the most part, are relevant throughout the province.

Overarching Themes

Before reviewing the Discussion Table topics, it is important to note that there were several overarching themes which resonated at each table, regardless of topic.

Newfoundland and Labrador as a Literate Province

The emphasis is on learning: Learning to learn, learning to live and living together in society. Emphasis in the school system needs to frame life skills as stepping stones to career development. To progress towards being a literate province we also need to promote literacy in life skills (financial, credit counselling, healthy cooking and food preparation) and continue to do so as part of basic adult education. Health promotion activities need to increase, and a health promotion lens considered for all policies and programs

Connections to Community

Being and feeling part of a community of some sort (geographical or otherwise) is an important indicator for well-being. There is dignity too in being part of the paid work economy. Also, we need to affirm peoples' participation in the volunteer sector as important in terms of contribution, being part of the community and valuable experience that may lead to transitions to paid work.

Neighbourhood conflict resolution teams, communities working together to support neighbours - in every way possible we need to find ways to encourage building strong communities, neighbourhoods and connections to them.

Communication and Collaboration

Improvements in the areas of communication and collaboration; between various levels of government (federal, provincial and municipal) and between government departments, levels of departments and community and governments; would make a huge improvement in service delivery and the experience of users. People, their lives and needs, are not experienced in compartments and continuity between different systems is required.

The internet and use of electronic systems as the information highway has had a profound impact on our everyday life. In fact, the pendulum swing is to depend heavily on this information access route. However, not everybody has access to phones, let alone smartphones. Systems could also make considerable improvements to information access by providing information in clear language – language easily understood by all.

Navigators

Across systems; health, education, income support, housing, transportation, family supports and early childhood education; people identified the need to have a Navigator to help them negotiate the system. It is important to acknowledge that interacting with systems is complex for many people. The inability to deal with various systems effectively makes personal situations more complex over time and subsequently more costly services are required.

Boulders – Often National in Scope

The following big issues need to be acknowledged. There are no easy fixes and effective actions often require systemic changes, value driven change and commitment from governments. As such, these boulders require efforts that start with broader policy from the Federal Government and policy that can be fine-tuned and adjusted between Provincial and Municipal governments.

Poverty

People need a basic income, a place to live, access to food, community and a pathway out of poverty. National in scope and painfully personal in life – the experience of poverty is challenging, stressful, limiting and often repeated. As a country, Canada does not have a defined measurement of poverty nor a methodology to measure inequities over time. The Guaranteed Annual Income, for example, would go a long ways to address poverty and its challenges, and there have been successful pilot projects in recent years. The following are policy goals to alleviate poverty:

- An affordable and adequate place to live: We need a National Affordable Housing Program. Too often, those without the means to meet their needs are in that situation because of the large portion of income paid for rent/housing. In order to keep a roof over their heads, individuals and families must sacrifice on money spent on groceries, heating bills, etc. By ensuring people pay an amount that is affordable, this money can be more effectively used to supply healthy foods, school supplies, etc.
- Access to healthy food: We need a National Food Security Program, especially for those in rural and remote areas. This would eliminate the financial barriers to eating healthy, while meeting a person's most basic needs and reducing health problems while increasing healthy behavior.
- Best chance possible to thrive: We need to optimize early beginnings for children with a national investment in Early Childhood Education. Not only will this provide the skills that some children living in poverty miss out on before attending school, it will also benefit parents, by allowing them more free time to pursue an education, career or other opportunities.

Platforms for Service Delivery

People need to access services in a dignified and timely manner, without a great deal of red tape or compartmentalization and the need to go to different sites for services. Platforms like *The Gathering Place* in St. John's are a one-stop kind of service hub where multiple services can be accessed. This kind of service hub is working well for many people. Residents in rural areas could benefit from mobile units. Bringing service closer to where people live makes sense and removes a number of barriers and stresses. The need to easily access services, while it may not be mentioned directly below, is of great underlying importance to address all needs highlighted in the policy report.

People with lived experience need to be included in the policy development cycle, as they encounter and deal with these obstacles every day. These people know their needs and how to meet them. We can all imagine the positive impact if these boulders could be moved.



Figure 2, Policy on the Rock. June, 2018.

Discussion Table Topics

Each topic area is introduced with a summary of the issue discussed and the main priorities and actions set for that area.

Housing Priorities

First and foremost, the spotlight needs to be kept on the Housing First Strategy as the role of housing in creating stability and well-being for individuals, families and communities is well understood. There is a perception that housing is crisis-based, that you need to be homeless before you can get action on housing or that you should use the political route and get an MHA to call to get action. There is also a sense that housing lists are not co-ordinated, and that the applications process is complicated. Streamlining these processes would be most helpful.

Housing Priority 1: Affordable and accessible housing

Explore setting Rent Levels as opposed to Rent to Level of Income. This could have a positive impact on the primary renter in that they might take in boarders, rent rooms or have adult family members continue to live at home without financial claw back.

Introduce choice of locations or being able to state a preference in your application. Currently, an offer of social housing is made and you need to take what is available or go to the bottom of the list.

Housing Priority 2: Eviction prevention from social housing

A policy shift is required so that, instead of outright evictions from a social housing unit, the emphasis is put on re-housing within the social housing stock. Move the person vs eviction from social housing.

Housing Priority 3: Explore housing alternative models and approaches

Current housing needs and the type of housing stock available are not always going to match. We need to expand options and consider different approaches including housing models where roommates choose to share housing space; the “Golden Girl” model where adults, often unrelated, choose to share a house; or where adult children or grandchildren live in social housing without financial claw back.

It is imperative to build on positive housing partnerships such as the partnership between the nonprofit community and Cochrane Street United Church or the collaboration between multi-level governments (federal, provincial and municipal), nonprofit community organizations and building developers used in the Pleasantville redevelopment which integrated social housing with other types of housing. It is effective against the detrimental effects of NIMBYism (Not In My Back Yard).

Housing Priority 4: Supportive housing

We need more housing options for individuals with complex needs, seniors, and those “hard to house”. The funds given to landlords for those “hard to house” individuals would likely get better outcomes if existing nonprofit housing organizations were given the same level of funding to create the housing options.

Housing Priority 5: Develop acceptable housing standards

In order to live independently in a rental space, such as a bedsitting room/studio apartment at minimum, residents should have a refrigerator, oven and furnishings.

It needs to be known where and to whom to report substandard housing. If housing is reported and the premises are found substandard, there needs to be assurance that the residents will have a place to go to live – that more homelessness isn’t being created. With regard to social housing stock, energy retrofits and staff to maintain housing standards saves money in the long run.

Who Can Play a Part? Provincial government can shift policy toward set rent levels to avoid financial burdens. They can also create incentives for energy retrofits, etc. NL Housing can simplify applications and expand options to choice of location and move their policy of eviction to relocating tenants within the social housing stock. City of St. John’s can work with community nonprofits to alleviate homelessness by finding temporary accommodations for ‘hard to house’ individuals. They can also create spaces dedicated to recycling useful furnishings and appliances, like refrigerators and ovens. The Department of Advanced Skills, Education and Labour can work on educating the public on the needs and struggles of those in low-income housing and create positive attitude and awareness campaigns. Community nonprofits can bridge the gap between government policy and the needs of those in low-income neighbourhoods. In other words, they can provide a voice via communication forums such as *Policy on the Rock*, to identify and meet needs. Nonprofits can also raise funds and awareness for ‘hard to house’ tenants and provide avenues of accessibility and understanding for seniors and the mentally and/or physically disadvantaged.



Joanne Thompson (left), Executive Director of The Gathering Place, and Bobbie Boland (right), Facilitator.
Figure 3, Policy on the Rock. June, 2018

Income/Financial Priorities

The realities of the lives of those people who live with poverty and the unrelenting stress they live with were very evident in discussion. We know that efforts at poverty prevention and reduction will lead to better outcomes and ultimately less cost for systems. We also know unmet needs will often lead to the evolution of more serious problems. Single able-bodied individuals receive such low income support that it leads to more challenging situations.

Income Priority 1: Reduce claw backs

Allow individuals to keep more of their income when they are working and increase the overlap period of income support and working income.

Regarding lone parent led families, the current policy is that child support payments are considered income and therefore deducted from Income Support payments. The Office of the Child Youth Advocate recently brought this issue forward and positive changes are anticipated in the next fiscal year.

Income Priority 2: Better assist individuals in rural and remote parts of the province

Every door is the right door – meaning that, once contact is made, a person should be served in such a way that their needs are addressed. People have a right to equitable access to all programs and services. We need to build on the supports that are available, and if possible use technology for person-to-person support.

Income Priority 3: Improve support for immigrants

The gap between federal and provincial programs such as education and employment must be better bridged.

Newcomers to Canada need access to quality legal services in general, and for child protection issues.

Who Can Play a Part? Provincial government need to work hand in hand with the Federal level to invest in the future of immigrants to give them skills required for finding a job as well as skills for day-to-day life. This co-operation should also be demonstrated between provincial departments, such the Department of Advanced Education, Skills and Labour, and Social Development. These departments should also strive to expand distance education for adult basic education and other programs of the same nature so that rural residents have access to the same opportunities as urban citizens. Furthermore, various government departments could restructure the policy of child support being counted as income by verifying the level of income *before* child support is accounted for and determining if it is fair to the child/guardian to tax this recalculated level. Community nonprofits can guide newcomers to Canada in finding legal services and all other required services while helping them navigate complicated systems. Nonprofits can also aid rural citizens in finding ways to access services normally not available due to geographic constraints. There is also room for innovation from the private sector to introduce new technologies to make services more available in outports.

Health Priorities

All the issues noted in this report have an impact on the health and well-being of individuals.

Health Priority 1: Communication between departments needs improvement as does public communication and messages

In terms of communication with the public, all messages and documentation need to be in clear language.

On a different note, care needs to be given to ensure that people are not identified by their labels or diagnosis.

Health Priority 2: Patient navigators and central places for access to information

The need for navigators in all systems has already been noted and this is particularly true in health care. We need clearly identified central places for information sharing.

Health Priority 3: Reassess the flow and level of decision making processes and unnecessary constraints

Physicians do not need to always be the gatekeepers and their signatures should not be necessary for all decisions. This level of authority as a requirement, when not necessary, places stress on a part of the system already stressed and introduces slowdowns for getting needs met. For example, currently a doctor's signature is required to get a new battery for an electric wheelchair.

Whether the origin of the problem is in purchase orders or in value judgement, being constrained in the flavour of nutrition supplements is one example of unnecessary constraints. For example, chocolate flavour not being covered.

Another example is a person on methadone treatment may be required to get services from the nearest drug store – though that drug store may not be taking on new patients or perhaps the person is banned from the particular drug store.

Income Priority 4: Individuals with disabilities in need of home supports

The home supports assessment process is experienced as invasive and unduly harsh. Individuals who may have financial resources are forced to “sell off” and rely on family to meet basic needs.

Who Can Play a Part? Regional Health Authorities can introduce public awareness initiatives to use clear and straightforward language when communicating through various levels of the health care system and create awareness that a person is not synonymous with their diagnosis/disease. The Department of Health can loosen unnecessary restraints put on individuals trying to access health care by considering patients' needs and considering both what a patient's wants and needs, and whether a physician's signature is necessary. There should be categories of care that only require an initial signature for example. Other levels of governments can aid in transportation for frequent and urgent users of the health care system, and perhaps partner with other fields to bring some medical services to those who cannot access them, or help people access a doctor remotely (i.e. Skype).

Transportation Priorities

Transportation needs intersect with all aspects of living; accessing resources, staying connected socially and participating in the life of the community. While transportation realities are different for rural areas and urban areas, it remains a huge consideration for organizations across the province.

Transportation Priority 1: Make transportation an integrated part of planning for service provision.

Creating hub communities for regional service provision may make good sense for the service providers. However, if transportation access is not considered in planning, it causes considerable hardship and barriers. The spread of services across urban areas or in different rural communities creates challenges to accessing service. The need to apply a poverty and social justice lens to transportation planning and current implementation of transportation systems is clear. Given weather patterns in the province, walking is always going to be a challenge. Improvements to roads and road design keeping in mind accessibility and utility of walk areas that are safe and user-friendly can facilitate walking.



Jackie Lake Kavanagh, Child & Youth Advocate for Newfoundland and Labrador. Figure 4, Policy on the Rock. June, 2018.

Transportation Priority 2: Better integrate existing transportation providers (both goods and passenger) into systems

Whether accessing food supplies for Kids Eat Smart or getting to another community or across a city for services, partnering with local transportation providers could offer solutions.

Transportation Priority 3: Bring a poverty lens to planning for transportation, including active transportation systems

There are considerable challenges to accessing subsidized transportation. Also of growing concern is that transportations systems themselves are becoming more smartphone dependent and therefore exclude many seniors and those on low incomes.

Transportation Priority 4: Public Transportation is used by people who depend on it– time to remove barriers

Most often people need to go to service providers rather than the providers coming to them. Currently, in order to receive a bus pass to facilitate access to health services, you must prove that you have at least 8 doctor appointments per month. Transportation to an emergency shelter must be approved through the Department of Advanced Education, Skills and Labour. This takes time and may be provided by a provider that is unregulated – introducing a particular vulnerability for victims of sexual violence. Bus routes and schedules are not in sync with grocery stores or early morning runs to major employers. There are insufficient bus shelters with seating space that allow protection from the elements while waiting, food banks must be visited... all issues that need attention. It seems as if we place the highest demands on the people with the fewest resources to meet those demands.

Some simple solutions:

- Political leaders use the transportation systems so they know the issues.
- Stop wasting time on proving poverty in order to access bus passes. Create a low-income bus pass for the city of St. John's – increase the ridership in doing so. Expand eligibility for subsidies for public transportation outside the city of St John's.
- Ask Metrobus to partner on a poverty lens of the system. Have buses that are stroller bucket seat friendly. Provide prime time bus runs to main areas. Add bus route numbers and schedules to bus stops.
- Make the criteria for the over utilized Go Bus service more clearly or fully fund it to meet the demand.
- Transportation subsidies per kilometer are very low and only economical for multi passenger vehicles. Raising the rates would be helpful.

Who Can Play a Part? The business sector, transportation providers and government departments who fund transportation for clients can partner together to develop a more effective transportation system. The government should identify the needs of low-income public transportation users and identify the hot spots within cities, towns and neighbourhoods to create more effective transport routes. Government could also offer free emergency shelter transport and verify it retroactively. The Department of Public Safety could partner with police services to provide this type of emergency shelter transport. Transportation providers could gather feedback from users and develop potential test routes for better customer satisfaction.

Education Priorities

As stated earlier, on a big picture level, there is a belief that we need to focus on creating a more literate and learned society – where people learn life skills and continued learning is valued.

Our schools are no longer the great equalizer and children age into adulthood at very different places along the continuum of education and life skills. Teachers are tasked with delivering courses for which they have not been trained (e.g. career development). They are also doing many things that have nothing to do with education (e.g. fundraising) and are often needing to deal with circumstances for which they have not been trained (e.g. trauma). The inclusion model, with its strengths, can mean that not everybody thrives.

Education Priority 1: Open communication between different government departments who work collaboratively towards a common goal

The lives and needs of students and families intersect with many different departments.

Education Priority 2: Focus on re-education and upgrading

We would like to see people get funding to upgrade their education and not have the funding attached to other programs such as Employment Insurance.

Education Priority 3: Incorporate career development and career advisors in high schools

We have assets in communities, such as retired citizens who have much to offer.

Who Can Play a Part? The Department of Education along with Memorial University can recognize the changing needs of students and train teachers in order to meet these needs. Community experts and business leaders can offer advice, experience and volunteer experience to students to push them in a career direction. School boards can train career guidance counsellors to aid students in finding a course load that works for their skill set and future expectations (e.g.

attending university vs attending trade school). They can also train teachers to deal with the immediate needs of students, such as the initial stages of things like trauma before a guidance counsellor becomes available.

Other Priorities

Food

Food is an absolute essential to life and access to healthy food is influenced by finances, education and availability. Food security, particularly of fresh foods, has been a concern in the province for some time and especially for rural and remote areas.

Food Priority 1: Place increased social value (outside of costs) on food

Introduce food skills training (cooking, waste, budgeting, storage, preparation, uses) into the curriculum of high schools and adult education programs. Families seem to be cooking at home less and perhaps an emphasis on time management and food preparation can help promote healthy eating.

Food Priority 2: Reduce the cost of healthy foods and quality food and improve the access to them

Healthy eating choices need to be made easier, food messages improved, costs reduced and cooking with simple and healthy ingredients promoted. Food waste could be reduced if there were stronger connections between food banks and grocery providers and food providers.

Who Can Play a Part? Food banks can alter their mandate and raise funds for preserved but nutritious foods, such as frozen vegetables. Agriculture can lend their expertise in establishing community gardens, especially in rural areas where fresh produce is scarce. Community-based supermarkets could bring healthy choices to rural areas. Food focused NGO's can work with community nonprofits to introduce communal gardens that grow fresh fruits and vegetables while donating a portion of the harvest to food banks. People accessing food aid should take advantage of education about preparing healthy foods and the benefits of a healthier diet.



Ethan Doney, Food First NL. Figure 5, Policy on the Rock. June, 2018.

Waste Diversion Program

Every day, quality furnishings end up in the landfill. *Home Again Furniture Bank* is an excellent service that takes furnishings and gets them to people who need them. There may be opportunities with a more serious emphasis on waste diversion – opportunity for skill development and potential career building opportunity though furniture cleaning and refinishing.

Waste Diversion Priority: **Reduce the convenience of the landfill and divert the resources such that they can be reused.**

Who Can Play a Part? Provincial Municipal Affairs can create programs and services directed toward composting and street side pickup for recycling. A public awareness campaign can create awareness and provide information on the *Home Again* service. Frontline agencies, the Department of Environment can offer subsidies, drop sites, pick-ups, etc. for recycled furnishings and coordinate used furnishings that need to go to or be picked up from rural areas.

Quality Childcare

Children ages 0-4 years who receive quality child care are less likely to leave school early, engage in criminality or develop addictions. They have longer life expectancy and greater employability. (United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child)

Quality Child Care Priority: **We need a child care system that is responsive to the needs of children and parents.**

Who Can Play a Part? Government can introduce subsidies for daycare costs while making certain that daycares are accredited and teaching a robust curriculum. College of the North Atlantic can offer a daycare service for parents going to school in the day/evening. Early childhood educators can set curriculum goals to tie in the key aspects of early childhood care throughout the day. Daycare centres can partner with education programs at MUN/CNA to develop a course involving hours spent at an early childhood education facility for flexible/low-income services. Parents can be vigilant about the daycare and services they are using. The business community can partner with government and introduce services directed at those in need of childcare (who cannot afford it) while working. It is important that the needs of children (socialization, learning attachment, relationship attachment) and the needs of parents (sliding scale costs, availability, flexibility for shift workers and sick children whose parents need to work) are both addressed.

The Need for Navigators

As mentioned previously, one of the biggest hurdles to those living in poverty is the complications from having to navigate a complex and confusing system. Whether someone has a health related inquiry, or is seeking emergency shelter transportation to escape an abusive situation, there is a seemingly endless supply of exhaustive and discouraging hurdles in place for people trying to access the services they need. In identifying all the policy objectives previously, there is also the crucial undertone to make all these services and systems easier to access and navigate so they do not sit idly as people struggle to service their needs.

In addition to the directory on the provincial website, the government can set up a hotline for those without internet access. For all inquiries, the government can assign workers to guide people through the process and see them through until their needs are met.

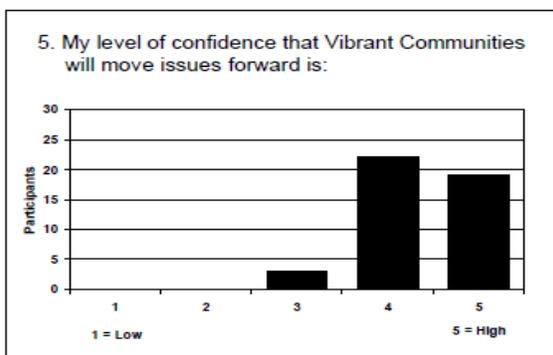
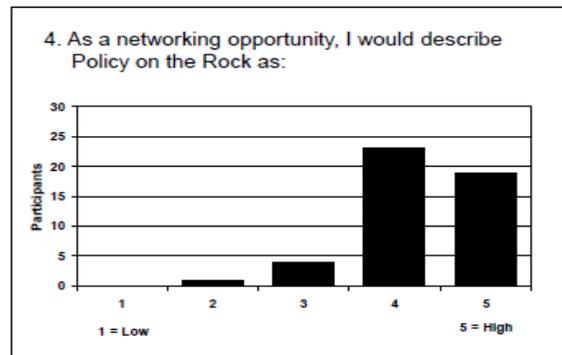
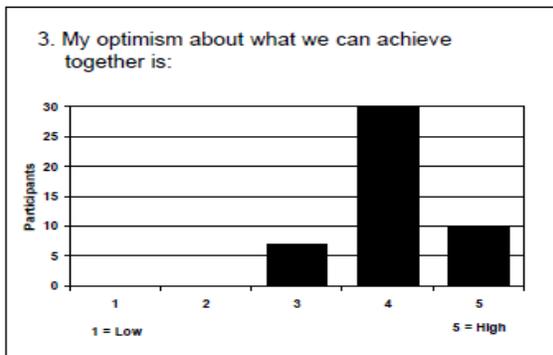
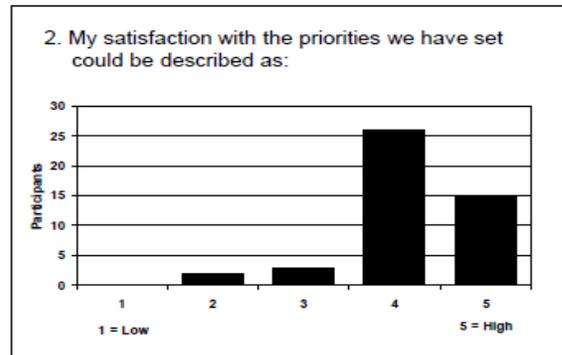
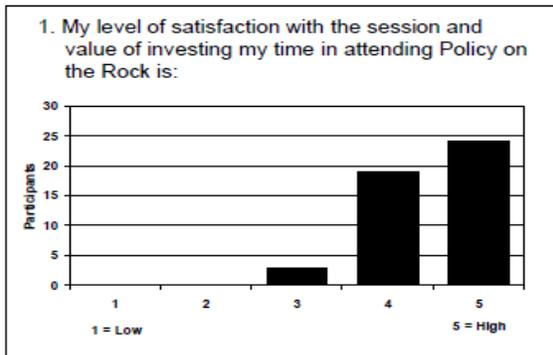
Next Steps

Vibrant Communities is committed to working with these priorities and trying to engage collaborative partners to advance solutions.

Evaluation Feedback

Overall, the evaluation feedback was very positive. Participants appreciated the opportunity for networking and learning about issues and particularly enjoyed the inclusion of people with lived experience in the discussion. Finding long term solutions is always a struggle and was noted in addition to the “St. John’s centric” focus of the discussion.

One participant rated the scales as 1 – meaning low; however their additional comments on the evaluation sheet suggested considerable enthusiasm and appreciation. It is therefore reasonable to assume this was not meant as a low evaluation but rather that the scale was interpreted differently.



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