

CHANGE

CITY HUB AND NETWORK FOR GENDER EQUITY

caring cities

MELBOURNE

learning from older carers



Introducing Caring Cities & the City Hub and Network for Gender Equity

The research featured in this report is part of the CHANGE Caring Cities program, which supports community-based research efforts that recognise local caregivers as experts and partners in shaping local policies.

CHANGE is an international network of cities dedicated to advancing the rights of women, girls, and people with non-binary gender identities. The City of Melbourne is part of the CHANGE network, connecting with other municipal governments to exchange and build on strategies that make cities safer and more inclusive for all.

Through Caring Cities, CHANGE supports government teams in its global network to conduct community-based research that invites caregivers to shape local services and policies. CHANGE believes that care is critical to gender equity and is partnering with cities to celebrate, learn from, and invest in caregivers.

CHANGE recognises that care is delivered through a complex local system that includes both paid and unpaid caregivers. The labour of care bolsters economies and provides stability in communities. Yet, caregivers have largely been under-acknowledged by governments, overlooked by traditional research, and severely undervalued in current economic systems. Care is also gendered, with the labour of care disproportionately provided by women – at home, in communities, and in paid professional contexts.

What is CHANGE learning?

Previously, the CHANGE Caring Cities program learned from community initiatives in Bogotá, low-income mothers in Buenos Aires, and private early child care providers in Los Angeles. Across cities, research findings have emerged that are relevant for those working to support more just and sustainable care systems:

1

Care occurs in a context of love, belonging, and trust. While institutions and governments often focus on the economics of caregiving, caregivers participating in the research also emphasised the importance of familial devotion, community connection, and personal passion.

2

When societies undervalue care, they undervalue women. The Caring Cities research illuminates the unequal expectations and exploitation of caregivers, who are disproportionately women. This leads to serious negative consequences for those receiving and giving care.

3

For governments investing in care, building local trust and partnerships is crucial. There is not a one-size-fits-all model for supporting caregivers. The Caring Cities research underscores that listening and learning from caregivers helps to avoid unintended harm to care systems and support communities and populations with the most acute care needs.

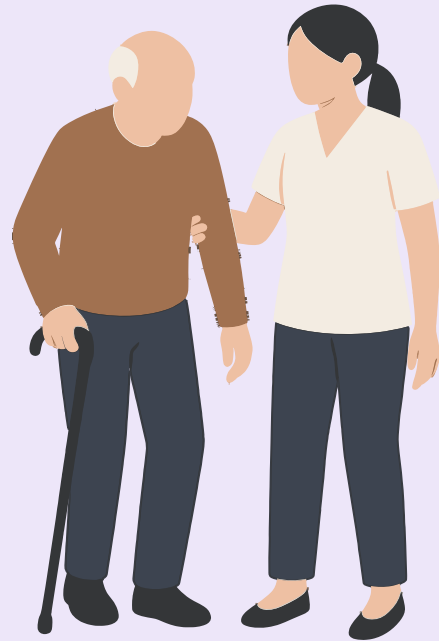
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Investments in care have a transformative impact on individuals, families, and communities. The participants engaged through Caring Cities research demonstrate that when caregivers have access to support, resources, and compensation, they improve their lives and contribute to their communities and cities in new ways.

Engaging Older Carers in Melbourne

Of the total number of people providing unpaid care or support in the City of Melbourne (locally known as “carers”), nearly a quarter are aged 60 and over. Furthermore, the population of older people is growing. Currently, more than 15,000 people aged 60 and over live in the City of Melbourne, making up approximately 10% of the total population. This is forecasted to increase significantly to more than 21,000 people aged 60 and over by 2036.

Older people often find themselves in the role of caregiver with limited preparation. This includes “hidden carers” – a term used by the organisation Carers Victoria to describe family members and friends in a caregiving role who do not see themselves as a carer and, therefore, may not access available support and services.



Without support, older carers can experience anxiety, isolation, and negative health outcomes. A review of global research demonstrates that older spouses with stressful caregiving demands have a higher mortality rate than their non-caregiver peers.

Through the CHANGE Caring Cities program, the City of Melbourne led a three-month research sprint from June to August 2025 to explore the experiences of older carers in Melbourne through interviews and focus groups.

Why Now?

In 2024, the City of Melbourne reviewed its council-funded healthy ageing programs. This was followed by community engagement through a survey in April and May 2025 to understand older residents' needs and priorities to age well in the municipality.

The survey successfully engaged 599 residents and generated meaningful insights. However, only 8% of survey respondents identified as carers compared with 2021 Census data, which showed that 14% of residents aged 60 and over provide unpaid care or support to others. Following the survey, the City of Melbourne prioritised additional outreach to diverse older carers to learn from their experience.

Learn more about the City Melbourne's existing services:
melbourne.vic.gov.au/older-people

Who was engaged?

Twenty-five older people were engaged through a series of focus groups and interviews. These Melbourne residents are providing care for a range of loved ones – including spouses, older parents, children with disabilities or health conditions, grandchildren, and friends.

The majority of participants (83%) identified as women, one third have a disability or are living with someone with a disability, and half were born overseas. The individuals engaged in this research were not intended to be a representative sample, but rather a cross-section of carers with diverse backgrounds.

Due to the research's short timeframe, certain populations could not be reached and provide important areas for further research moving forward. This includes older carers in the LGBTIQ+ community.

Getting to Know Melbourne's Older Carers



This section introduces profiles of four older carers. Their experiences carry the wisdom and complex lived experiences of older carers, offering insights into how to strengthen government services.

The names and details included in the profiles have been changed and combined to protect participants' privacy and summarise findings. Anything featured in quotes was a direct statement made by an older carer during the research.

Meet Mei

Mei is a 64-year-old grandmother who lives with her husband and adores spending time with her four grandchildren. She also cares for her ageing parents. Mei enjoys gardening and cooking traditional Chinese foods.

While Mei is grateful to have so much family around her, caring across generations requires a lot of time and attention. She is always waiting for a call, either to care for her older parents or look after her grandchildren, especially since her children (the grandchildren's parents) work in medicine and get called in at all hours.

“

Culturally, caring comes naturally to me. It is customary to look after your loved ones. But I'm always on alert. If I receive a call late at night or two or three calls in a row from my parents' phone, I worry that something bad has happened.

”

“

I had to take leave without pay to look after my two elderly parents, who do not speak English. I'm very grateful for the support I receive from the government for the aged care package. I wouldn't be able to care for them physically or financially.

”

Mei's mother is aged 88, and her father is 91 with health challenges, including using a walker. She has tried to honour her parents' desire to age in their own home. With government support, she secured a Cantonese-speaking paid carer for her parents. However, she still needs to attend all of their doctor appointments to assist with the interpretation of complex medical terms.

Mei believes that ageing well requires you to stay active and engaged. She wants to take her parents places, but she struggles to negotiate public transit with

her father's walker and often finds it challenging to help her father use the restroom in public places.

She wishes the city were more accessible.

Mei values meeting with other carers. She found the City of Melbourne's older carers walking group when searching for resources online. It has been a transformative opportunity to get to know her neighbours and local services. Now, Mei attends a few carers' networks as well as the monthly lunch, walking group, and Chatty Cafe.

“Before joining the carers walking group and activities, I was a shy person. I didn't know much about my neighbours or local services. I've learned a lot of information which has helped build my confidence.”

Insights from Mei's experience:

- Increase access to language interpretation support for older people in community programming and in medical contexts.
- Offer information and skill-building for older carers related to common experiences, like caring for someone with memory loss or dementia.
- Make public spaces and transportation more inclusive to people with disabilities – including making accessible, all-gender bathrooms available for older carers who may support someone of a different gender.
- Support older carers in organising community events that inspire them, like intercultural meals that bring together diverse community members.

Meet Peter

Growing up in a small town in rural Queensland, Peter remembers being surrounded by family members of all generations, with everyone helping out. Aged 70, Peter loves to be in the community and to be of service to others.

Nearing retirement, Peter and his wife, Kim, expected to travel overseas and enjoy their time together. However, ten years ago, Kim was diagnosed with a motor neurone disease that has left her with acute physical disabilities. Now, she relies on Peter to get her out of bed each morning with the help of equipment. In her current condition, Kim rarely leaves the house. All of the cooking, cleaning, and care falls to Peter.

Peter is proud of caring for his wife. The highlight of his day yesterday was painting her nails a beautiful red colour. But the care can be physically and emotionally demanding.

At first, Peter devoted himself to Kim's care, not seeking any assistance. But he wishes he had accessed services earlier. Peter also feels there are opportunities to do more proactive outreach to older carers to inform them of

available services earlier in their journey and help them navigate options.

Now, after ten years of caring, Peter has better systems in place. When it comes to taking time for himself, he is less interested in meeting other carers and more excited about intergenerational spaces where he can put his caring duties on hold and be himself.

“The first few years, I thought I could handle it. But I burned out, quit my job, and had to call Lifeline to talk to someone. They suggested I see a doctor, who then referred me to a counsellor. I now attend regular sessions. I wish I had the knowledge earlier. I suffered for over a year and a half, not knowing there were other ways to cope with caring duties.”

”

People don't think they're going to be a carer. Normally, you're just going along with your life. But then something happens, like it happened to us. Suddenly, you have to go to all these medical appointments, deal with operations and pain and financial loss. Your big plans for the future go out the window. You are thrown into the deep end”

“

He enjoys weekly choir rehearsal in his neighbourhood and attends local Zumba classes, where he watches and sometimes joins in. These free and flexible activities are well-suited for his current lifestyle as a carer because he never knows what each day will bring. The choir also offers free tickets to local performances, which helps Peter reduce financial anxiety about spending \$80 on a ticket and not being able to attend because Kim needs help that evening.

Peter has also become a dedicated advocate for his

**“My caring is 100%
when I am at home.
When I am out, I
want to escape for
a while.”**

neighbourhood, working to bring more services to his community. Even while caring for Kim, he feels like he has so much to give. In the role of community advocate, Peter has attended council meetings and connected with local organisations. He is excited to see progress being made by his local efforts.

“What I'm doing now is leaving a legacy of community connection because once the community is connected, then they're feeling safer. When they're safer, they feel happier and more productive.”

Insights from Peter's experience:

- Conduct proactive outreach to older carers earlier in their journey to inform them of available services – including radio ads and posters in public spaces that reach people not using the internet.
- Provide navigation support and advocacy for older carers as they work through complex medical and governmental systems.
- Connect carers with mental health support before they reach a moment of burnout or crisis.
- Provide free, flexible, and intergenerational community programming to help carers engage on their own schedule as their responsibilities allow.


Meet Eva

Eva is a writer originally from India who moved to Australia as a child. She married her childhood sweetheart after a school dance many decades ago. Now, mostly retired at 77 years old, she wants to use her skills to tell the stories of older people.

Eva has been on a challenging journey of caring for her husband, who had early-onset dementia that radically changed his personality, leaving him with mood swings and bouts of violence. It took her a long time to seek support.

When the symptoms first started, Eva did not know what to do. She was embarrassed to have friends over because of his behaviour. Furthermore, within her family, there was a lot of cultural stigma related to mental illness that made it hard to know what was happening and how to get support.

Eva feels devoted to her husband, who lovingly looked after her when she was battling cancer earlier in her life. When the dementia started, she wanted the best for him, but was also struggling with how to inform and resource herself as the situation changed.



“I’d love to be part of a project where older people can share their stories and memories. I believe older people are the most marginalised. They act like we have one foot in the grave. We need to be heard.”

“I felt I needed special training to protect myself and prepare for the violence. I needed to be told not only about the medication, but also the expectation of violent behaviour that can come about with people with dementia.”

She eventually found a painting class that her husband enjoyed at a local community centre, which helped her connect to other government support. A worker at the centre took the time to learn about Eva’s situation and connect her to different services.

After many years caring for him at home, Eva recently put her husband into an aged care facility for additional support. She is still very involved with checking in on him regularly, making sure he receives high-quality care. Living alone has been both a relief and an adjustment.

There is a lot of grief related to his dementia and the transition to a care facility.

Eva knows that community is critical in times of transition. She is interested in getting more involved in programming for carers, but is not internet savvy, which can be a barrier to her participation.

Eva believes that engaging with other carers will help her feel less isolated and more supported as she takes this next step in her journey of care for her husband and herself. She is excited to find ways to use her storytelling skills to help others.

“For many years, I found it challenging because I couldn’t share my frustrations with my husband, as he couldn’t comprehend, nor could I ask him to help me... I feel like he has died. But he is still here. “

Insights from Eva’s experience:

- Provide culturally competent dementia and memory loss training that is comprehensive, explaining potential medical and emotional changes.
- Cross-promote services for carers in other government and community programming.
- Include offline alternatives for program registration to help address different concerns and skill levels with technology.
- Create more opportunities for older people to use their professional skills and passions to help the community.

“A lot of programs and events require you to book online. Online booking is so insecure. I am fearful of being scammed. It would be good to have a helpline or know where to go or who to speak to about booking activities.”

Meet Narelle

Narelle was a career educator teaching primary school for many years. Now, at 62 years old, her greatest achievement is supporting her grandson, Jeffery, who is autistic and legally blind. Narelle has looked after Jeffery since he was aged six. He is now in his early 20s and has grown into a caring adult.

“From where he's come from and his behaviour when I first got him, and to the young gentleman that he's turned into today, that's my reward. I'm very proud of the person that he's become.”

Narelle identifies as Aboriginal and considers herself part of the Stolen Generation, a period when Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children were forcibly removed from their families through government policies. She was taken away at six months old and was never legally adopted. Narelle's experience made her determined to keep her grandson in the family rather than allow his care to be overseen by the government.

Since Jeffery came into her home, Narelle slowly reduced her working hours in order to manage his care. This has led to less income and challenges with housing security. Their frequent moves between rental homes are hard on Jeffery, who thrives with stability. It has also made Narelle feel more isolated and less able to access networks of support.

“I used to work full-time, but when my grandson’s health declined, it limited my ability to continue working. Occasionally, when he's able to go out with a paid carer, I find myself with free time. But the problem is, there's nowhere to go and nothing to do. I don’t have any social connections.”

Narelle has put a lot of time and energy into finding support for Jeffery, but has struggled to access consistent care through the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS). Specifically, Narelle has found care for Jeffery is of varying quality with inconsistent training for the paid carers. Narelle has also been exhausted by navigating the bureaucracy, receiving numerous inaccurate charges and struggling to connect Jeffery with mental health services.

Narelle feels confident that their upcoming move to a

safer building and neighbourhood will help make things easier on both of them. She appreciates her daily walks, chats, and errands with Jeffery. As she gets older, it can feel like their caring relationship is reciprocal.

“He's so kind, caring, and understanding. If I'm struggling to get up or something like that, he'll offer me a hand. So, it's a two-way street, which is lovely.”

Looking ahead, Narelle is hoping to feel less isolated. She wishes there were a central directory with all of Melbourne's activities and services, so it would be easier for her to find programming and support. She is hoping to find a carers support group along with Aboriginal cultural program to educate Jeffery about his heritage. section introduces profiles of four older carers. Their experiences carry the wisdom and complex lived experiences of older carers, offering insights into how to strengthen government services.

“My hope for the City of Melbourne is that there will always be somewhere people can go so they don't have to feel lonely.”

Insights from Narelle's experience:

- Provide navigation support and advocacy for older carers as they work through complex medical and governmental systems, like the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS).
- Continue to build trust with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, who have experienced historic harms from government institutions.
- Anticipate that many older carers face financial and housing insecurity, which can increase stress and isolation, and make it harder to access services and networks of support.
- Create a central directory of activities and services in the City of Melbourne that is easy for older carers to access.

Recommendations

The experiences of Mei, Peter, Eva, and Narelle provide a compelling, although incomplete, look into the lives of the thousands of older carers who call Melbourne home. Their profiles reflect the themes surfaced through the CHANGE Caring Cities research. As the City of Melbourne continues to evaluate and invest in healthy ageing services, here are recommendations for local leaders to keep in mind.



Older carers in Melbourne are dedicated, resourceful, and loving. Let's honour their valuable contributions and build on their strengths.

Every day, older carers are making positive impacts in Melbourne, offering life-sustaining support to family and loved ones. For many, this caring role provides a sense of purpose and pride.

“My husband and I care for each other. I care for him now like he cared for me when I was sick. It's something you do naturally in a marriage. You have a responsibility. It is sewn into the way of life and the bond of a family.”

Here are ways to uplift older carers:

- Increase the visibility of older carers by showcasing and celebrating their strengths and experiences. This can help create more welcoming environments, combat ageism, and increase participation in services.
- Support research and engagement efforts that amplify the experiences of older people and carers, so that their voices can shape local policies and services.
- Build the skills of older carers to better serve the people they support.
 - For Mei and Eva, this includes training to better understand how to care for a loved one with memory loss, going beyond the medical details to address the emotional and cultural dimensions.

Helpful Framework: Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD)

ABCD is an evidence-based approach that celebrates and builds on a community's strengths rather than their deficits or needs. It supports bottom-up, creative solutions where residents are empowered as co-creators. Learn more about how ABCD is being used in the City of Canberra, Australia.

Inspiring Project: "The People Say" Online Research Hub

The CHANGE Caring Cities program utilises qualitative, community-based research to uplift the experiences of carers. Now that older carers in Melbourne have been engaged, how do we keep learning and make their experiences more visible? In the United States, ["The People Say" Online Research Hub](#) serves as a dynamic portal for displaying qualitative research. It features insights from older people and caregivers in the United States on the issues most important to them.

2 Older carers are eager for connection and community. Let's offer inclusive and flexible programming tailored to their lives.

The demands of being a caregiver are physical, mental, and emotional. This can leave older carers depleted and disconnected. Many recognise the importance of investing in their own health and wellbeing to sustain their role as carers.

"Being a carer, you're like a cormorant. You're in a nest on a coast all by yourself out in the middle of the ocean."



Here are suggestions for how to care for older carers:

- Invite older carers to partake in a diverse local programming at libraries, community hubs, and sports and recreation facilities.
- Older carers can benefit from a range of services. Mei appreciated the healthy ageing carers walking group that linked her to other older carers, whereas Peter preferred intergenerational spaces like his community centre's choir that allowed him to take a break from his carer role.
- Provide free and flexible offerings that accommodate the unpredictable schedules and financial strain that many older carers face.
- Include offline alternatives for program registration to help address different concerns and skill levels with technology.
- Offer support for carers in a range of different languages and locations.
- Refer carers to counselling and mental health services early in their journey rather than waiting until a crisis.

Celebrating Existing Services in the City of Melbourne

Many older carers discussed the important role that city services and healthy ageing programs played in their lives. From Zumba classes at a community centre to a healthy ageing walking group, older carers had great experiences with services and were eager to further engage.

- Existing healthy ageing programs that include the Out and About Guide, the Connections Program that helps with service navigation, and social programs like the Chatty Cafe, Monthly Lunches, and Afternoon Social. There is also specific support for older carers, such as the Walking Group and Carers Newsletter.
- For older carers eager to volunteer, they can connect to volunteer opportunities like the City Ambassadors or the neighbourhood volunteer program.
- Those seeking to participate in local activities can access the neighbourhood portals. Programs that offer free tickets for events and concerts were particularly appreciated.

3 Government and community services can be life-changing for carers. Let's make them easier to learn about, access, and navigate.

As older people find themselves in the role of carer, navigating bureaucratic systems can be challenging. Carers who find an open door into government services often get plugged into a web of support, but many do not know where to start and could use an ongoing advocate.

“What I wished for in the early days of being a carer was help figuring out all the services. You've never done any of this before, and you have to figure it out all by yourself.”

Here are opportunities to improve how older carers access services:

- Conduct more proactive outreach to older carers to inform them of available services. This includes cross-promoting resources for carers through other government and community programs as well as offline outreach, like radio ads and posters in public spaces.
- Provide access to language interpretation in government and medical contexts.
- Make public spaces and transportation more accessible to people with disabilities.
 - Mei wanted more accessible, all-gender bathrooms and changing places in public places that would allow her to support her father.
- Increase navigation support and advocacy for older carers as they work through complex systems, including the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) and aged care services, also known as My Aged Care.

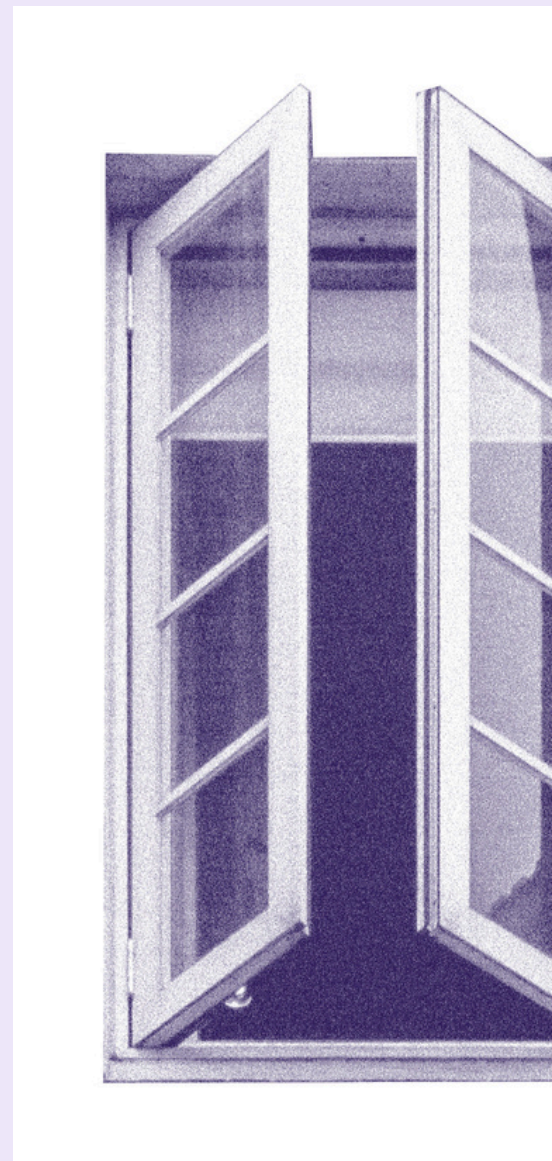
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Older carers have so much to offer. Let's create opportunities for them to contribute.

Investments in care have a transformative impact on individuals, families, and communities. The participants engaged through Caring Cities research demonstrate that when caregivers have access to support, resources, and compensation, they improve their lives and contribute to their communities and cities in new ways.

“Even after retirement, we [older people] want to be active contributors. Many of us have professional skills. It is good for us to keep our minds active.”

- Learn about the skills and passions of older people and carers in order to help them plug into existing volunteer opportunities.
- Create a directory of activities and volunteer opportunities in Melbourne that is easy for older carers to access.
- Support older people and carers in leading new offerings to help their communities – like peer-support groups, art exhibitions, or storytelling projects.
 - Mei had the idea of hosting intercultural cooking events and meals that bring together diverse community members.
- Offer civic engagement opportunities that invite older people and carers to help influence Melbourne's future.



Opportunity: Older Wisdom Can Shape the Future

Futuring is the process of exploring, analysing, and designing for a better future. The City of Melbourne conducts futuring exercises through efforts like Melbourne 2050 Vision.

The Caring City research found that even in their later years, older people were eager to engage in future thinking. They want to leave a legacy and share their wisdom and life experience to help make communities better.

Inspiring Project: CoGenerate

CoGenerate is a global organisation that brings together older people and folks from across generations to solve problems together. They believe that “We’re living in the most age-diverse society in human history — and one of the most age-segregated. We’re missing out on the complementary skills and talents people of all ages can bring to the table, the power and energy they can create, the divides they can bridge, the communities and country they can build together.”

Ageing is all about navigating change and embracing uncertainty, characteristics that are critical to thriving in the 21st century. The older people engaged through the Caring Cities Melbourne research demonstrated tenacity, flexibility, and resilience that can be an inspiration for the City of Melbourne and residents of all ages. Local leaders have an opportunity to learn from, work alongside, and support the older carers who help sustain our communities.



Engaging the Older Carers in Your Life

Inspired to get involved? Everyone can learn from the older carers in your family and community. Reach out and have a conversation!

Here are some questions to start with:

- Tell me about your day yesterday. What was the best part of your day? Did you encounter any difficulties? What is one thing you are proud of accomplishing?
- What has being an older carer taught you
- What advice would you give to others who may be providing care or support to a loved one?
- What hopes do you have for your own future?
- What legacy do you want to leave for future generations?



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