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Agents of Hope: Meet the NRVCS Board's Executive Committee

**NRVCS hosts
workshop on
implicit bias**

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ON THE COVER:

Members of the NRVCS Board's Executive Committee pose for a photo at the agency's Radford Center. Seated are Cheri Warburton (left) and Kelly Edmonson. Standing are (from left) Bobby Davis, Jerry Boothe, and Anthony Akers. (Photo - Ross Wilsie/NRVCS)



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but it's the knowledge that
it's worth it
to take another breath."*

*- Rev. Libby Pfaff
Nineveh: Lutheran Justice Ministry*

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Agents of HOPE

Meet the NRVCS Board's Executive Committee

The 13 individuals who serve on the Board of Directors at NRVCS (New River Valley Community Services) are each appointed by the region's five local governing bodies - the counties of Floyd, Giles, Pulaski, and Montgomery, and the City of Radford.

Here, we profile the five members that currently make up the Board's Executive Committee. They include: Anthony Akers, Cheri Warburton, Jerry Boothe, Kelly Edmonson, and Bobby Davis.

Profiles written by Mike Wade / NRVCS
Photos by Ross Wilsie / NRVCS

Anthony Akers

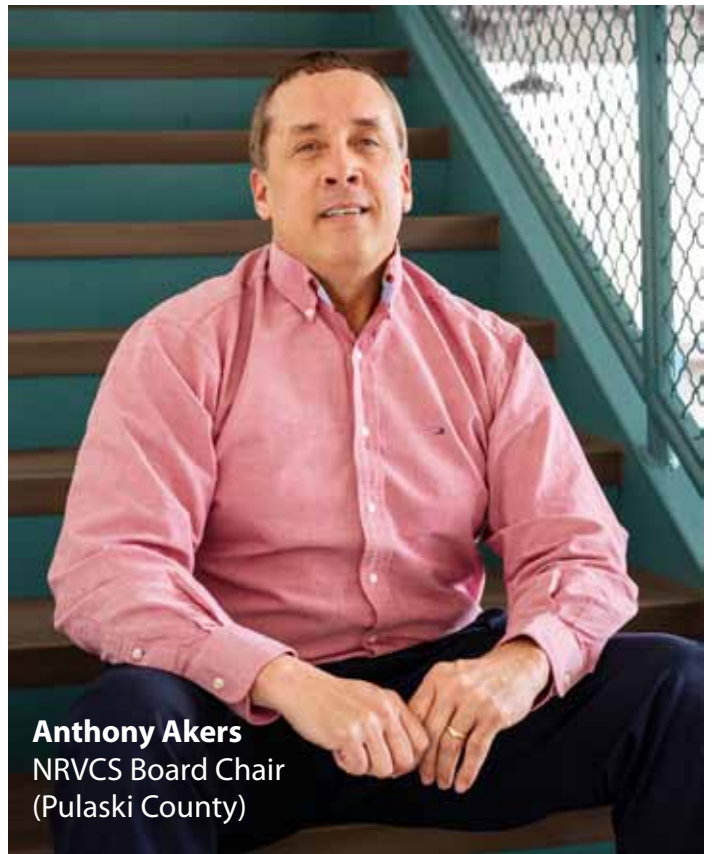
Some sit on boards or accept appointments out of a sense of obligation. When it comes to serving on the NRVCS Board of Directors, Anthony Akers has been all in.

Akers, the Assistant County Administrator for Pulaski County, is reaching the end of his third consecutive three-year term on the NRVCS Board, the maximum allowed. Having first been appointed in 2015, Akers (currently the Chair) will attend his final meeting as a member of the Board this June.

"Coming off the Board will genuinely crush me," says an emotional Akers. "This is something that's been very important to me and I will definitely miss it."

A native of Pulaski County, Akers been heavily involved with some of NRVCS' work in the community. He actively serves on the team for the county's recovery/drug court program, the Pulaski Community Partners Coalition, and the Pulaski County Commission on Children and Families.

"In my role with the county and because of my role on the NRVCS Board, I have the honor and privilege of being around people who genuinely care for others," Akers notes. "I sincerely want to do this work because I enjoy seeing



Anthony Akers
NRVCS Board Chair
(Pulaski County)

definition of hope:

"Hope is one of the most powerful words in the English language. It's something that is achievable when you are surrounded by people who foster that same mentality and want the same for others. Hope simply gives us the fortitude to move forward in life".

- Anthony Akers

people's lives changed or being impacted in a positive way."

Because of his tenure and seemingly endless connections in the community, Akers has witnessed first-hand both the struggles and triumphs associated with mental health and substance use.

"The work of this agency has had a major impact on Pulaski County," he notes. "I frankly don't know where we would be from the standpoint of helping people overcome these issues if not for NRVCS, their wonderful staff, and services they provide. I just can't even imagine that."

Even for someone like Akers who has years of experience engaging with NRVCS at multiple levels, he says it can be difficult to stay on top of the steady stream of changes around programs and policies.

"It's very challenging to comprehend the many facets of the agency - almost mind-boggling really," adds Akers. "I think the average citizen would be shocked to truly know the types and amounts of services provided by NRVCS."

Cheri Warburton

As a retired employee from NRVCS, Cheri Warburton does have the advantage of being familiar with many of the programs and services discussed at board meetings. Still, Warburton would be the first to admit that she's also playing 'catch up' on the numerous changes that have occurred since she left the agency 12 years ago.

"Having worked for NRVCS has definitely helped me because our agency is so large," Warburton notes. "It's hard to comprehend all the different parts – even for me - because I've been gone for a while."

"Plus, I still know some of the people doing the work, so it was easier for me to walk in as a board member and understand all the things this wonderful agency does for the community," she adds.

Warburton, who is one of three Pulaski County representatives on the NRVCS Board, currently serves as Vice-Chair and is in the middle of her first three-year term.

The majority of Warburton's 30-year career at NRVCS was spent working in crisis services. Although she acknowledges strides have been made to meet the needs of individuals experiencing mental health emergencies, the limited access to psychiatric inpatient beds continues to be a major concern.

"We've got to do something about psychiatric hospital issues – we can't keep not having beds – we've got to figure that out," she says. "Ideally, private and public facilities could collaborate in a way that best serves the community - I mean, I think that would be nirvana – but in the end, it always comes down to money."

While there may be a limit to what the agency can do to address the issue of hospital beds, Warburton believes NRVCS' expanded efforts to support children and families have been significant.

"I think the impact those services are having is incredible," she says. "Many of the kids we work with in the schools would not be able to get services any other way – and the schools certainly can't afford to do it – so to me, that is invaluable."

"Obviously, we have a great need in this area because there simply are not enough providers and that's why services like home-based [intensive clinical service] are so important," adds Warburton. "We're meeting people where they are – and that's huge – especially in a community like Pulaski County."

Given her decades of connection to NRVCS, Warburton says she's still surprised to encounter community members who are relatively unaware of the scope of services provided by the agency.

"Most people only know us for what they've needed us for," she explains. "When I talk about how large our agency is and how expert our staff are, I don't think 90% people realize just how much we do – or the sophistication of the



Cheri Warburton
NRVCS Board Vice-Chair
(Pulaski County)

definition of hope:

"To me, hope is the inner belief that things will get better, and there will be an answer; even if it's baby steps, things will get better; part of that is being able to see where your feet are now, and seeing a path forward."

- Cheri Warburton

services we provide."

In addition to keeping pace with the growing concerns around substance use disorders, Warburton says she believes addressing workforce issues is the biggest challenge currently facing NRVCS.

"I think both the board and leadership recognized that we had to step it up around pay and compensation – and I think we've made some real progress in that area," she remarks. "That was partly brought on by COVID and the impact that has had on staffing, but we have to continue making that a priority – just to stay competitive in the market."

While she is very much enjoying retirement, Warburton hasn't completely walked away from serving the community. She currently works part-time as a secretary for her church and is grateful to have been given the opportunity to sit on the NRVCS Board of Directors.

"I get to keep my toe in things and stay involved in an agency that I love – one that I'm incredibly proud of – and hopefully, I can be of some service in my capacity as a board member to support that work," she continues. "I also get to see some of the people I worked with for so long – that's a plus – and I just feel more informed."

"That helps me make connections, put community members in touch with people that can help them, and I can share information about the services we offer," adds Warburton. "It keeps my brain working and I like that!"

Jerry Boothe

Jerry Boothe is no stranger to public service - or to the NRVCS Board of Directors for that matter. In fact, after serving as a board member for several years in the early 2000's, Boothe was reappointed in 2020 to serve as one of two representatives for Floyd County.

Boothe, who also currently serves as a member of the Floyd County Board of Supervisors, says he's been actively involved in local government since first joining the county Planning Commission back in the mid-80s.

"I guess you could say I've managed to stick around," Boothe says with a chuckle, "but it's really about helping people."

"That's why I first got into politics and I'd like to think I'm giving back to my community in some way," he adds, "Being on the NRVCS Board is certainly a part of that, as far as I'm concerned."

Boothe recalls when the five local governing bodies in the New River Valley first decided to appoint an elected official from each jurisdiction to sit on the NRVCS Board.

"I know there were some folks at the time who were concerned about that move," he notes, "but I don't think the local governments truly understood everything that the agency actually does. So, I believe it's definitely helped in that regard."

Boothe says the extensive amount of services offered by NRVCS - and the budget connected to those services - are complex. Having a solid grasp of both, he says, is not only helpful for members of the board - it ultimately benefits the agency and the communities it serves.

"I think for everyone on our board, it's a matter of trying to support the leadership and staff to ensure that they have the tools and resources necessary to meet the needs that are out there," he notes.

During Boothe's first stint on the board, Virginia's mental health system came under scrutiny following the 2007 shooting incident at Virginia Tech.

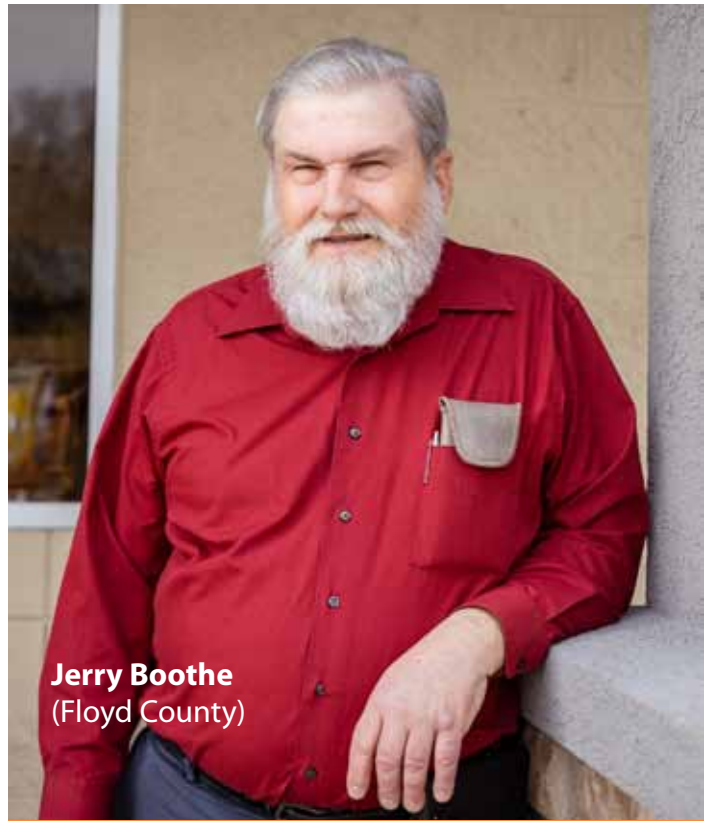
"That was a very difficult time for many of us on a personal level," Boothe recalls, "and our agency caught a lot of the brunt that it shouldn't have."

"There's certainly been improvement to the mental health system since that time, but I think you'd be hard pressed to find anyone who will say that we've fixed all the problems."

While he believes increased awareness of mental health is a positive, Boothe is quick to challenge the stereotypes that are often placed on those who struggle with mental illness.

"Just because someone has a mental health problem, that doesn't make them dangerous or a killer," he declares.

Boothe is optimistic that programs like the Behavioral Health Docket (currently operational in Montgomery County) will help NRVCS better address the needs of the



Jerry Boothe
(Floyd County)

definition of hope:

"The word hope, to me, means providing someone with a more positive outcome than what they would have had otherwise. No one hopes to get worse. We all want to get better. If in some small way we can aid in that, I think we've done our job."

- Jerry Boothe

community.

"I really have high hopes for that program," he adds. "A lot of people that end up in jail don't need to be there."

He goes on to say that the agency's Crisis Center has been another significant development in recent years by giving individuals more rapid access to care while minimizing the involvement required of local law enforcement.

"I think the agency's growing presence in Radford has not only helped provide more people with access to services, it's really made citizens more aware of NRVCS," says Boothe.

Regarding challenges for the agency, he believes hiring and retaining qualified and dedicated staff will be an ongoing area of concern.

"Finding and keeping good people is tough regardless of what industry you're in," Boothe adds.

"I honestly don't know how our staff accomplish the work that they do," he continues. "But what makes this organization great is that we have a committed board and very dedicated employees."

"From what I've seen over the years, our agency is operating better than it ever has - and that's saying something," he concludes.

Kelly Edmonson

Kelly Edmonson might be in her ‘rookie’ year with the NRVCS Board of Directors, but she has literal decades of knowledge and first-hand experience with the agency.

First appointed to the NRVCS Board in July 2023 as one of four Montgomery County representatives, Edmonson’s professional life has provided ample opportunities for her to learn the agency’s programs and to also establish relationships with many of its employees.

Edmonson has spent nearly 24 years at the Montgomery County Department of Social Services (DSS). She’s been the Department’s director since September 2020.

“My work at Social Services is one of the reasons I wanted to serve on the [NRVCS] Board. In my 23 – almost 24 years – at DSS, I’ve worked with multiple CSBs (Community Services Boards) across Virginia and NRVCS gives the best service overall to clients – to everybody we serve in the community – and that’s just being straight honest. It’s not the fact that they’re in my back door.”

“I think being on the NRVCS Board enhances the job that I do because I can share information with my staff, stay on top of legislative issues, and if there’s something that isn’t working, I can make leadership aware so things can be tweaked in a way that hopefully benefits everyone involved,” adds Edmonson.

As far as adjusting to her role as a board member, Edmonson says she’s learning to compartmentalize and approach things a bit differently than what she’s accustomed to doing over the course of her career.

“I’m a social worker at heart and so I just like to jump in and get things done,” she remarks, “but as a board member, I know I sometimes have to take a step back and go with the speed of the Board because there are usually layers of things that have to be considered before action can be taken.”

To be better positioned for the future workforce, Edmonson believes agencies like NRVCS and DSS need to be more intentional in educating young people about the variety of available social work careers.

“I think one of the biggest challenges that everybody in the human services world is experiencing is turnover - and hiring and making sure you’re getting qualified staff,” she explains. “This work that we do day-to-day is not for the faint of heart and it’s tough to hang on to good people.”

“We need to do a better job of promoting human services as a viable option to young people while they’re still in high school so they can decide early on if this work is something they would like to do,” Edmonson adds.

Speaking of young people, Edmonson is a proponent of increasing efforts around education and prevention of substance use and misuse as the risks associated with those behaviors continue to grow.

“We really need to push that information beginning in elementary school and through middle school to help kids



Kelly Edmonson
(Montgomery County)

definition of hope:

“I have hope knowing that God is with me and will get me through whatever comes my way... Even if you don’t have that belief, you can still walk side-by-side with people to support them and give them light when times are dark. I believe hope is about shining your light for others who need it.”

- Kelly Edmonson

better understand the dangers of substance use because we’re just going to see them carry those issues into adulthood if we don’t put a stop to it.”

Edmonson adds that some of the responsibility around prevention and education should ideally fall to parents, but she is also realistic about the general state of parenting in 2024.

“Somewhere along the way, we’ve stopped holding parents accountable,” declares Edmonson. “We’re allowing kids to parent themselves or parents reach a certain point and say, ‘I’m done’ and that’s really unfortunate.

“Parenting is one of the hardest things that anyone can do, but the job we do as parents ultimately determines the success or failure of our future generations,” she adds. “Instead of blaming, though, I think we need to walk side-by-side with people and show them a better way.”

Bobby Davis

All 13 members of the NRVCS Board of Directors are volunteers, each appointed by the local governing bodies served by the agency. When one of the City of Radford's two seats became available last year, Bobby Davis - a member of City Council - was eager to fill it.

"I actually asked to be appointed," he points out. "I have a heart for the homeless and so I like being involved with boards and committees that help support or work on behalf of the homeless, so this seemed like a great opportunity."

"Part of it for me is personal," Davis explains. "When I was a kid, there were times that my family was in the same position some of these people are in, so it's something that's always been close to my heart."

"Everybody wants to use a big, broad paintbrush when it comes to folks who struggle with homelessness," he continues, "but people become homeless for lots of reasons - it isn't always drugs or mental health problems, or someone not wanting to work. It's usually way more complicated than that."

Davis admits joining the NRVCS Board required a bit of a learning curve. In fact, he says one of the biggest challenges was becoming familiar with the many acronyms used within the agency.

"At first, I struggled with trying to absorb everything," he shares, "So, I didn't foresee me enjoying quite as much as I do."

"I've already learned so much since I've been on the Board," adds Davis. "I didn't fully realize the range of the agency's programs, how big NRVCS is, or how involved it is in the community. Wow."

"Now that I better understand that, I feel like I can help point people in the right direction when they need help," he continues. "It's been a good experience and I'm proud to be affiliated with the agency."

Davis says he is comfortable referring community members to the agency because he's come to learn how dedicated its employees are.

"Since I've been on the Board, I've been very impressed with the caliber of the people who work for the agency," he adds. "I don't think just anybody could do this work - you have a true passion for it and I have been certainly found that to be true in the people I've gotten to know at NRVCS."

"You can't pay people enough money to care - that comes from the heart," declares Davis. "I can tell they are genuinely trying their best and genuinely care. That's what makes a difference."

Davis acknowledges that while some community members may even be aware of NRVCS, they may not fully understand how to reach out for help or to get connected



Bobby Davis
(City of Radford)

definition of hope:

"I live by faith, so my hope is in Jesus...A lot of times, you come across someone and you happen to be in right place at the right time, so you can give them direction and lead them to find the help they need. When someone feels like too many things in their lives are broken, that can be overwhelming. Showing that person there are others who genuinely care is one way to give hope."

- Bobby Davis

with services.

"It's probably just the nature of the area we live in, but I feel like a lot of people who are struggling will first turn to their family or their church to get help," Davis adds. "So, I think one of the ways we as board members can have an impact is helping people fully understand what the agency does."

"With the problems around things like drugs and suicide, children and parents are struggling more than ever but this agency does so much to help," remarks Davis. "I'm very thankful for that."

"We are so blessed to have NRVCS here in Radford," he concludes.

NRVCS hosts workshop on implicit bias

By Mike Wade / NRVCS
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“When you know better, you can do better.”

Those were among the many words of wisdom shared by Dr. Bryant T. Marks, Sr. during a workshop on implicit bias at New River Community College in Dublin on March 22. The event was sponsored by NRVCS.

Dr. Marks is a minister, researcher, trainer, and award-winning educator. He is the founding director of the National Training Institute on Race and Equity and is an associate professor in the Department of Psychology at Morehouse College in Atlanta, Georgia.

He told the dozens in attendance that implicit bias (also commonly referred to as “unconscious bias”) is not a fad or trend - and no matter how open-minded or accepting we may consider ourselves to be - we all have implicit biases.

Marks explained that his presentation was designed to raise awareness and not to change behaviors. He added that the goal was to help attendees identify, manage, and reduce their own biases.

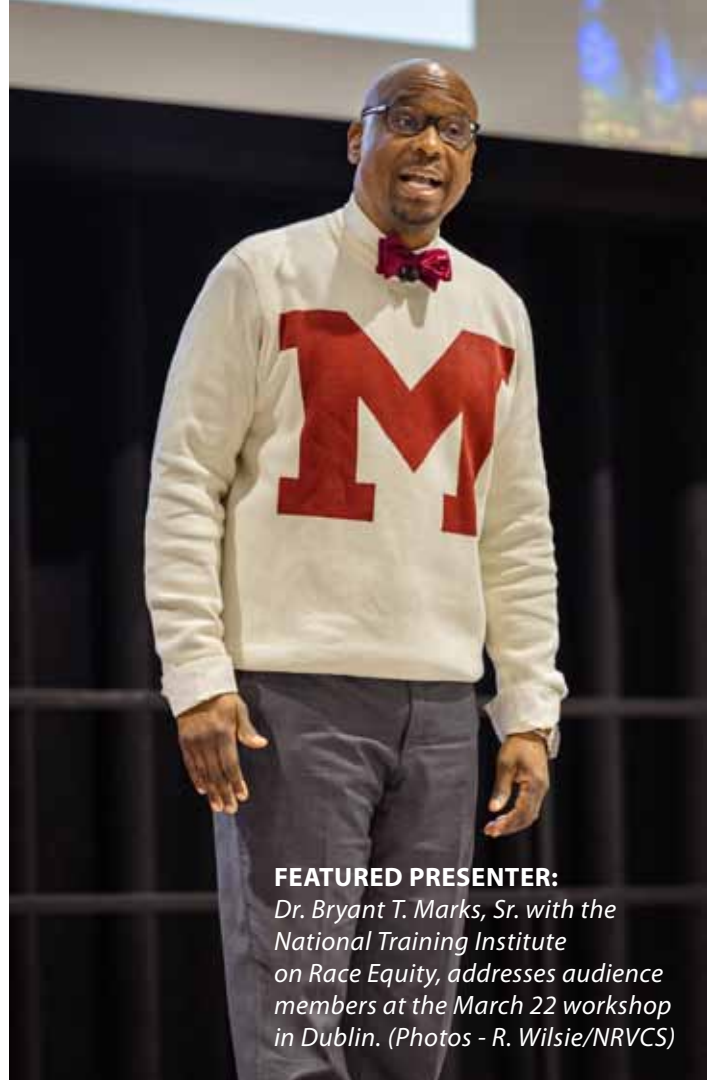
“It’s part of the universal human principles that have always been with us,” he said. “Our minds are built to be efficient, but that doesn’t make you a bad person - it simply makes you human.”

To emphasize that point, Dr. Marks noted there are two criteria for a person to have implicit biases: (1) living in society; and (2) having a brain.

“In order to acquire a deeper understanding of implicit bias, you have to understand that this is much more about the machinery of your mind than the content of your character,” said Marks.

A native of New York, Marks is the son of a Mississippi sharecropper. During his time as a professor at the University of Michigan, Marks shared that he had Tom Brady (legendary NFL quarterback) as a student in one of his classes. He also served on the Obama Administration and has provided training for major corporations and organizations across the country.

While Marks declared that we all have biases, he noted that not all biases are inherently bad. However, our respective



FEATURED PRESENTER:

Dr. Bryant T. Marks, Sr. with the National Training Institute on Race Equity, addresses audience members at the March 22 workshop in Dublin. (Photos - R. Wilsie/NRVCS)

roles in society can cause those biases to have varying degrees of magnitude.

“Two people can have the same biases but they can certainly have a different impact,” Marks said. “Your title does not exempt you from humanity.”

Marks added that many of the biases we own are a result of disproportionate exposure - an ongoing reinforcement of the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors that feed into the perceptions we have of others.

“The reality is that there is more to each and every one of us than meets the eye, but our biases are almost always based on what is visible,” Marks said, “but it’s the things about us which aren’t visible that are far more important.”

NRVCS Executive Director James Pritchett, who initially contacted Dr. Marks about visiting the New River Valley, says feedback from the workshop has been so strong that there are already preliminary discussions about future training opportunities featuring Dr. Marks.

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Akers

From Page 4

If funding were not an issue, Akers believes NRVCS could do even more to support residents of the New River Valley by expanding existing programs and creating new ones. However, he also points out that type of expansion would only be possible if enough funding was included to also pay a sufficient number of staff to do the work.

“We are very fortunate to have lots of wonderful people working at NRVCS,” Akers notes.

“I really think the biggest challenge for the agency moving forward is maintaining a level of staffing that can handle the caseload volume,” says Akers. “The needs are so great and there just aren't enough people to meet that demand.”



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