

## UNDERSTANDING NEW ORLEANS NEIGHBORHOODS

### I. PROJECT PURPOSE

The scope of New Orleans' problems is difficult to describe in just a few pages. Wide disparities across the city's neighborhoods are especially troubling. For example, 58 of the 73 neighborhoods in New Orleans have a poverty rate higher than the national average. In 17 neighborhoods, over two-thirds of the children under six live in poverty, with one neighborhood having 94% of its children in poverty.<sup>1</sup> The public schools serving these neighborhoods are under-funded and failing; New Orleans spent only \$5,797 per student in 2000-1<sup>2</sup> (compared to \$7,079 nationally<sup>3</sup>), and 88% of our public schools were labeled "Academically Below Average" or worse.<sup>4</sup> And, 44 of 73 neighborhoods have more adults without high school diplomas than the national average.<sup>5</sup>

According to 2001 IRS records, these neighborhoods are served by nearly 2,500 nonprofit agencies with budgets over \$25,000.<sup>6</sup> And, according to records at the Center for Nonprofit Resources in New Orleans, several thousand additional nonprofit organizations exist locally.

Findings from our independent evaluator suggest that most New Orleans nonprofits do not base their program plans on evidence. A 2001 evaluation of 74 grant proposals received by the four largest local funders revealed that nearly one-third included no data to demonstrate need or justify program design. A follow-up in 2002 concluded that the amount of data in proposals had increased slightly, but there was still significant weakness in using data to inform program plans.

Since 2000, some local funders have begun to invest in citywide collaboratives in an attempt to better coordinate local activities around specific community problems. Currently, a dozen such collaboratives exist.<sup>7</sup> However, New Orleans still lags in nonprofit collaborative development; only *one* New Orleans collaborative has been in existence for more than 7 years (the threshold for "maturity" set by the Kellogg Foundation<sup>8</sup>).

To summarize, New Orleans is home to many social and economic disparities, and multiple attempts at resolving them. However, there is little capacity for using evidence to inform solutions that will more effectively meet the community's needs.

The nonprofit and public health literature reveals a growing call for evidence as a basis for planning more effective social interventions.<sup>9</sup> Accordingly, the long-term vision we share with other capacity builders and stakeholders in New Orleans is the following: The local nonprofit community designs their programs with information that goes beyond anecdotes and personal experience, reaching out to incorporate best practices and fact-based planning. And when they write grants, they correctly identify risk factors, target programs on areas of high need, and incorporate knowledge of local populations and assets. And local funders make strategic investments in neighborhoods to produce long-lasting impacts.

The Greater New Orleans Community Data Center (GNOCDC) is working as part of the aforementioned community system, simultaneously engaging funders, government agencies, other capacity builders, collaboratives, neighborhood residents, nonprofits and community-based organizations. (See App 2 for an overview.) As a data intermediary, our role is to be a central resource for information about the city and its neighborhoods for members of this system.

### ***Our proposed intervention***

In the narrower scope of the current proposal *Understanding New Orleans Neighborhoods*, GNOCDC will work with collaboratives, capacity builders and neighborhood residents to create an information platform to facilitate a common understanding of New Orleans neighborhoods. Smart use of Internet technologies will form the foundation of this effort. Our theory of change is that an easy-to-use common information base about our neighborhoods coupled with direct technical assistance to targeted groups of nonprofit agencies will accelerate the mainstreaming of data use in

their sectors, resulting in more fact-based planning, and eventually greater community change through these higher functioning nonprofits.

Currently, the GNOCDC web site includes demographic data about New Orleans and its neighborhoods. Although this is a good starting place, these numbers alone are inadequate for coming to a common understanding of the needs and strengths of these communities and the systems that impact them. We propose to integrate a more robust set of information into this existing infrastructure to include:

1. New indicators (drawn primarily from commercial Census estimates) to illustrate racial and other disproportionalities, along with contextual learning opportunities to promote an informed and responsible interpretation of this data
2. Maps of neighborhood assets (such as childcare centers, schools, literacy services, etc.) to enable visualization of how assets within and across neighborhoods are distributed, plus just-in-time learning materials to support interpretation.
3. Explanatory models of neighborhood residents woven into data and map displays, to provide the story behind the data and give voice to those whom the data is purported to describe.

This expanded information base will be augmented by trainings and direct technical assistance customized to the current capacity for data use in targeted collaboratives and their agencies. Our outcomes for the *Understanding New Orleans Neighborhoods* project are to:

- Increase use of the centralized information resource available at the Greater New Orleans Community Data Center web site <[www.gnocdc.org](http://www.gnocdc.org)>.
- Increase the effective use of data in planning and decision-making in two large collaboratives and their member agencies: *The Literacy Alliance* and *Success by 6*.

## II. INNOVATION

GNOCDC builds upon the experience of neighborhood indicator projects nationwide working to democratize the use of data in local policymaking and community building. This network of data intermediaries established through the Urban Institute's National Neighborhood Indicator Partnership (NNIP) has been a key resource in the creation and refinement of our processes.

### *The current state of neighborhood indicator projects & technology*

To date, the core strategy in NNIP organizations has been to give local communities access to data, coupled with training and technical assistance to help them use the data. Operationally, this has manifested in organizations working to create reports and provide technical assistance for specific community partners. However, most NNIP organizations have not had the time or resources to create enduring materials that would be generalizable to a wide array of community information needs.<sup>10</sup> For those organizations that have, Internet technologies are playing a major role in the dissemination of this information, typically in the form of data tables and maps.

The fact that New Orleans was not an early leader in the technological dissemination of public information proved to be an advantage. With no legacy data systems in place, GNOCDC was able to build upon the work of other cities to create a centralized, citywide information system from scratch. The technology that supports these initiatives (web applications and dynamic mapping) has matured to the point where there is now a critical mass of technology professionals using these tools, which are more stable and easier to customize than just a few years ago.

Early in our initial design process, we evaluated the major existing community data systems on the web, applying standard usability heuristics and test cases of the types of data requests we have received locally. We visited these web sites using both low-end and high-end machines, from slow and fast connections, and found that the more sophisticated systems were so "feature-rich" that their usability would most likely be a barrier to our local audience. Additionally, many of the technologies employed to deliver this content placed a high cost-of-entry on end-users, requiring browser plug-ins, fast machines, large monitors and ample bandwidth.

**The digital divide in New Orleans.** According to 2002 figures from the Census Bureau, only 26% of African Americans (who represent 67% of the total population) in New Orleans have Internet access at home, compared to 62% of Whites. And the size of the digital divide is 12 percentage points higher than the US average.<sup>11</sup> New Orleans ranks 30<sup>th</sup> out of 50 metro areas in the percentage of adults with Internet access at work or home, and 47<sup>th</sup> in broadband telecommunications capacity.<sup>12</sup>

Data from 81 nonprofit managers we surveyed in 2002 revealed that 7% have no Internet access at work and 47% have only dial-up access. Despite the obstacles, we have found the local nonprofit community to be very resourceful when it comes to accessing information on the Internet. Some agencies have a single Internet-ready computer that all employees share. Many nonprofit managers do their web research at home or at public access sites. Nearly 70% report that they are comfortable using a web browser. So although the technology available to New Orleans nonprofits is limited, they are making great use of what they have and learning important Internet skills in the process.

Typically, the digital divide is addressed by providing those on the lagging end with affordable technology and training. This strategy is important, but as a data intermediary that supplies content on the Internet, the most appropriate way for us to narrow the divide is to approach it from the supply side. Thus, we design systems to minimize technical and usability barriers to accessing our data. Data is complex enough – we do not want to force people to jump through costly technical hoops and decipher cryptic interfaces to get the numbers they need.

### **Our innovative contributions**

Publishing neighborhood data and asset maps on the web holds great promise for reaching a community audience. This proposal contains three major innovative contributions to this field.

#### ***Innovation #1: Accommodate the simplest possible client technology***

Our current web site contains more than 36,000 data points, 550+ indicators, from 8 different data sources, covering 73 neighborhoods and 5 counties. All of this data is published on more than 1,000 static HTML pages that can be viewed with a 4-year-old web browser from a dialup modem. The data pages are designed to print easily without cutting off the sides, and all screen widths fit in 800 x 600 resolution. We make minimal use of JavaScript, which can be tricky across browsers, and do not use java or plug-ins at all. Our philosophy is to shift as much computing burden to the server and development side as possible, so our end-users need only basic systems to use the site. (See section V for detail.) This approach is innovative, as the industry trend (especially in dynamic mapping) is to push the envelope of technology and then play ‘catch-up’ by supplying end-users with access to higher-end client systems and training.

The proposed project *Understanding New Orleans Neighborhoods* will introduce a new technology to our web site – that of dynamic mapping. We recognize that this new technology could make our site less accessible to those on older machines and using slow connections, and have plans to minimize the barrier this would create for end-users. We have been discussing the special design considerations that this technology imposes with colleagues around the country who are currently using it. We have learned that a common complaint with community data systems, especially dynamic online mapping, is that they are very slow, taking up to 90 seconds to download a single map, for example. (Research has shown that users are rarely willing to wait longer than 20 seconds for content.<sup>13</sup>) Neighborhood Knowledge California (NKCA), another NNIP member and TOP-grantee, has been especially helpful and has agreed to collaborate with us on this technical issue as well as on content development (see letter of commitment, App 3).

#### ***Innovation #2: Design easy-to-use systems***

Our experience has shown that designing highly usable, intuitive systems can improve end-user efficiency in finding information and decrease the need for training about the system itself. This, in turn, allows us to spend valuable one-on-one time assisting people in using data, not teaching them

how to use our system. We design user experiences to complement the existing information-seeking strategies of our end-users, conducting iterative, formal usability tests to identify design features that we can better match to the needs of our end-users.

The literature on user interface design and usability confirms that this attention to detail is essential for creating a successful user experience. For example, a recent usability study reports that rates of successful task completion on web sites average 42%. But, if there is a single 'Back' button click as the user navigates the web site, then completion rates plummet to 18%, and with the second use of the 'Back' button, down to 2%.<sup>14</sup> Through usability testing, we can catch obstacles in the information architecture of the site to reduce the need to hit the 'Back' button. In doing so, we help ensure that our interface is not adding an additional barrier between the community and data.

The functionality that comes with dynamic online mapping requires the user interface to be more complex than a typical web page. With this in mind, we will use the NKCA mapping interface as a starting place and evaluate it for modifications that would better serve our local audience. As we develop our mapping prototype, we will test it on lower-end computer systems and will refine the design through formal usability testing with Literacy and Success by 6 agencies. We will share our findings with NKCA (and other NNIPs) and discuss with them the feasibility of implementation.

Every time we add substantial content to the web site, we develop new research questions for usability testing. We plan to conduct 6 rounds of user testing during the course of this grant (see Timeline App 4-6), two for each major activity. As of Dec 2002, no other NNIPs were engaging in formal usability testing for their web sites, although such testing is a best-practice in e-commerce. Our adaptation of this technique to a community data system is innovative and will be of value nationwide, especially when we modify our existing protocol to test mapping interfaces as well.

### ***Innovation #3: Integrate contextual learning materials into the data displays***

In crafting the content for the web site, we draw from the psychology literature (especially around building self-efficacy and behavior change) and the field of instructional design to integrate learning moments into the data itself. People are most motivated to learn when the content is highly relevant to the task at hand (such as, when they are seeking a piece of data for a specific purpose). To capitalize on this, we integrate just-in-time learning moments into our data displays, and catch end-users at the "seducible moment" when they'll be self-motivated to learn more. For example, in the data table that describes neighborhood racial and ethnic diversity, we include a short blurb about (and a link to) the article entitled *Race & Ethnicity in the Census* (See App 7 for example) Testing with end-users in local nonprofits has shown this strategy to be effective. In the current proposal, there are three major types of contextual learning materials to be developed.

**1. New indicators on disproportionality.** When we choose the new indicators to illustrate racial and other disproportionalities, we will create just-in-time learning moments that promote an informed and responsible interpretation of this easy-to-misconstrue data. We will work with The People's Institute (a local collective of anti-racist community organizers) and the Center for Urban and Regional Equity (an economic development effort founded by the Mayor). These partners have emphasized that race data, if presented carelessly, has the potential to do more harm than good for neighborhoods. These partners will assist us in the very deliberate choosing, naming, defining, and contextualizing of these new indicators. Contextual learning materials may take the form of a paragraph embedded in the data page, a pop-up definition, or, for complex issues, an entire article.

**2. Neighborhood asset maps.** Creating, interpreting and using maps will be new for most of our end-users. We will work with NKCA to co-develop a curriculum around these topics. The curriculum will be comprehensive, and specific topics for development into learning materials will be chosen based on a set of existing criteria. From this, we will create learning materials (just-in-time and larger pieces such as articles and training handouts) that can be localized for our respective audiences.

To map neighborhood assets, we have partnered with capacity-builder VIA LINK to use their Community Resource Directory, which contains detailed program information about local social service agencies. This detailed information [services, hours of operation, address, phone, etc.] will be central to giving end-users enough information to interpret the maps wisely. Adapting the Directory (designed for information & referral purposes) to support neighborhood asset mapping is an innovation that would easily port to other cities with similar information & referral systems.

**3. Community explanatory models.** Typically, when experts use data to assess the state of a neighborhood, they employ an explanatory model born of their professional discipline and personal biases. A community explanatory model, in contrast, is an assessment by people who live in the neighborhood about what their neighborhood data means. We will interview 2-3 individuals each from 20 of our 73 neighborhoods and ask them questions about select data that describes their neighborhood. (See App 2 under community members for rationale in choosing neighborhoods.) We will ask: what do you call the phenomenon described by the data, what causes it, what effect does it have on the neighborhood, is that effect positive or negative, and what should be done about it, if anything. (These questions are based on anthropologist Arthur Kleinman's seven questions for cross-cultural medical assessments.<sup>15</sup>) The explanatory models we elicit from residents will serve as learning materials for nonprofits and decision-makers to help them understand the story behind the "objective" numbers.

This content is essential because the data and maps, no matter how accurate or complete, will always be inadequate in describing the complexities of life in an impoverished neighborhood. Publishing community explanations for the data is a first step. The format we use to weave the explanatory models into the data and mapping displays will depend on what type of content we get from the community residents (e.g., the length of their explanations, how focused they are on a particular indicator, and how much overlap there is in the explanations provided by different residents). This integration of narrative explanation and data will need to be refined through usability testing before it is applied to the initial 20 neighborhoods. We anticipate that this innovative approach will be valuable to other cities struggling with how to handle the inadequacy of numbers alone for assessing neighborhoods. We will share our protocol and results widely through means discussed in section IV.

### III. COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

Each of the components of this proposal were conceived jointly by GNOCDC and community partners. Working with the People's Institute and their network of community organizers, we identified the need for data that demonstrates disparities. Agencies in the Literacy Alliance and Success by 6 expressed eagerness for information about neighborhood assets to augment their ability to effectively serve their clients. And the need to add community voices to the data was articulated repeatedly by local community advocates. The interest of these end-users is well documented in the attached letters of commitment (See App 8-9.)

#### **Nonprofit collaboratives and their agencies**

The primary end-users of our platform will be the 180 agencies of the Literacy Alliance and Success by 6 collaboratives, and the collaboratives themselves. Focusing efforts on collaboratives allows us to most efficiently identify and disseminate relevant information to agencies.

To build capacity for incorporating data into their program planning activities, each year we will conduct two **trainings** and provide 50 hours of direct **technical assistance** for each collaborative. (This 50 hours is in addition to ongoing intensive work with the collaboratives around training design, evaluation, strategic planning, neighborhood asset identification, usability tester recruitment, and more.) The content of the trainings and technical assistance will be determined mutually by each collaborative and us, based on the member agencies' and collaboratives' information capacity (as

determined by the independent evaluator; see Section IV). Links will be added to our web site to guide member agencies directly to relevant content. These agencies will help identify **relevant neighborhood assets** to be mapped and provide the primary feedback on the web site by participating in **usability testing**. (See Knowledge Creation Cycle, App 10.)

***Literacy Alliance of Greater New Orleans Collaborative*** (See letter of commitment App 8.)

The Literacy Alliance of Greater New Orleans works to expand the range and effectiveness of literacy services and raise public awareness of adult literacy issues. Members include faith-based institutions, community colleges, technical schools, universities, adult education programs in public schools, public libraries, halfway houses, the sheriff's office, the Urban League, and YMCA. GNOCDC has worked with the Literacy Alliance since its earliest stage in 2001 when it contracted us to provide data tables and maps for the market analysis section of their strategic plan.

***Success by 6 Collaborative*** (See letter of commitment App 9.)

Success by 6 delivers proven solutions that ensure all children ages zero to six are healthy, nurtured and ready to succeed. Members include children's advocates, public schools, pre-schools, childcare centers and other nonprofits serving young children. GNOCDC has worked with Success by 6 since its inception in 2002, facilitating the introduction of evidence into their planning methods and providing market data to support analyses.

**Other capacity builders**

***The People's Institute for Survival and Beyond*** (See letter of commitment App 11-12.)

The People's Institute is dedicated to building an effective movement to systematically dismantle the causes of racism through workshops and technical assistance. In Feb 2003 we co-published a series of four articles on how data has been used by African Americans and can be used for positive social change. These articles have been viewed more than 2,400 times.

***Center for Urban and Regional Equity at Xavier University*** (See letter of commitment App 13.)

The Center for Urban and Regional Equity (CURE) serves as a catalyst and facilitator to address the extreme social and economic disparities in New Orleans, through the government, nonprofit, and for-profit sectors. CURE is housed at Xavier University of Louisiana, a historically black college. CURE regularly uses information from the GNOCDC web site when presenting to local community leaders.

***VIA LINK*** (See letter of commitment App 14.)

VIA LINK's mission is to connect people and organizations with information resources to enable them to help themselves and others. VIA LINK fulfills this mission through services, referral, and crisis intervention. They publish a print and online Community Resource Directory of social service programs and agencies in New Orleans. GNOCDC first began working collaboratively with VIA LINK in 1999 in the development of "Community Web Link" – an online portal that links New Orleans nonprofits to services and information offered by local and national capacity builders.

**Residents of the 20 pilot neighborhoods**

We will work with the People's Institute and community-based consultants to identify and interview 2-3 residents from each of 20 pilot neighborhoods in New Orleans.

**Other outreach**

The ***Numbers Talk*** newsletter currently has membership of 520 individuals. We send brief e-mail announcements about new data resources and articles every 4-6 weeks, typically playing off current events to maximize impact. This newsletter is distributed to local nonprofit agencies, collaboratives, neighborhood groups, community organizers, city employees, and students and faculty at local universities. All members of *Success by 6* and the *Literacy Alliance*, all community residents providing community explanatory models, and all partners in this *Understanding New Orleans Neighborhoods* project will be invited to receive *Numbers Talk*.

For 2003, **search engine traffic** accounts for 67% of 4,000 monthly unique visits to our web site. We will continue to use standard practices to maintain our search engine standings.

#### IV. EVALUATION AND DISSEMINATION

##### **Evaluation**

For two years, GNOCDC has been working with independent nonprofit evaluator Jane Arsenault (See bio in App 15-16) hired by our primary funder Baptist Community Ministries. Under Ms. Arsenault's guidance, GNOCDC has developed multiple systems for ongoing, formative evaluation to ensure continuous quality improvement – both in processes and products. Continuous quality improvement is now an integral part of our organizational culture. (See App 17 for details on Internal CQI.) She is also conducting a summative evaluation, establishing in April 2001 the baseline of data use in grant proposals from four area funders and testing progress against the baseline in April 2002. For the proposed project, she has prepared a detailed evaluation plan that builds on the current evaluation, summarized as follows. (See App 18-19.)

##### ***Outcome 1: Increase use of GNOCDC web resource by local nonprofits***

*Evaluation Question (all years):* What is the (baseline) status of use of the web site by target audience? *Strategies:* Online survey conducted for 30 days asking site visitors to self identify; further validated by phone interviews with a random sample of respondents. Server statistics as a general measure of web site traffic.

##### ***Outcome 2: Increase the effective use of data in two large collaboratives and their agencies***

Standards will be developed regarding identifying risk factors and target markets, knowledge and use of neighborhood assets, and inclusion of community perspectives in program plans.

*Yr 1 Question:* What is the baseline status of use of data in program planning in each of the collaboratives? *Strategies:* Extensive personal interviews with leadership and a sample of members. Attendance at key planning meetings. Begin deep case studies.

*Yr 2 Question:* How does the use of data change over time as the collaboratives work with GNOCDC? *Strategies:* Extensive personal interviews with leadership and a sample of members. Attendance at key planning meetings. Continuation of deep case studies. Review sample grant proposals submitted by agencies. Review all proposals submitted by collaboratives themselves.

*Yr 3 Question:* How does the use of data change over time as the collaboratives work with GNOCDC? *Strategies:* Extensive personal interviews with leadership and a sample of members. Attendance at key planning meetings. Review of sample of grant proposals submitted by agencies. Review of all proposals submitted by the collaboratives. Completion of deep case studies.

##### **Dissemination to peer organizations**

Approximately 1/5 of the **Numbers Talk** newsletter recipients are national colleagues. And, we post announcements of major content additions to the **NNIP News listserv** (~380 people nationwide). These postings, in addition to real-world **semi-annual NNIP meetings**, have resulted in informal and formal information-sharing with NKCA in Los Angeles, Piton in Denver, Setnis in Chattanooga, Providence Plan in Rhode Island, Urban Strategies Council in Oakland, SAVI in Indianapolis, and the Academy for Educational Development.

As part of this proposed project, we plan to continue these outreach efforts, and expand them to formalize sharing of resources through **NNIP toolkits** (protocols for usability testing, community explanatory models, server statistics analysis, etc.) and **presentations at the bi-annual NNIP conference**. We will also present at the national **Success by 6 conference**, and distribute lessons learned through the **National Alliance of Urban Literacy Coalitions**.

## V. PROJECT FEASIBILITY

### Technical approach

#### *GNOCDC's existing web page creation system*

GNOCDC has a sophisticated system for generating large numbers of template-based static web pages (and associated content in Excel spreadsheets, pop-up definitions, etc.) that can be individually customized. This system is elegantly scalable to allow for new geographic areas and new indicators to be easily added, and will support all activities in this grant (new indicators, integration of learning materials, and asset mapping). See App 20 for detailed schematic.

#### *Mapping system*

The new technology to be adopted in this project is online dynamic mapping of neighborhood assets. The data for the assets will come from our partner VIA LINK's Community Resource Database. The mapping software we have chosen is ArcIMS, the market leader and generally accepted standard within our peer organizations. Also, it is compatible with City systems and our current desktop mapping software. App 21 shows the details of data transfer and technology to support the system.

#### **Organizational capacity**

The existing GNOCDC team is well-equipped to take on the *Understanding New Orleans Neighborhoods* project. We have a director with both management and content expertise, an information systems designer, Internet database applications specialist, web and data production manager, nonprofit management consultant, and independent evaluator (see biographical sketches App 15-16). The evaluator has documented that the team works exceptionally well together, and has developed a culture of careful planning, ongoing evaluation, sharing with national colleagues, and a keen attention to quality and detail.

GNOCDC benefits from the administrative infrastructure of its fiscal agent United Way. We also benefit from being physically housed in Tulane's Dept. of Health Systems Management, where we have appropriate facilities and support including T1 Internet connectivity and front-office technologies. (See letter of support App 22.) And, from previous funding cycles, GNOCDC is well-equipped with the desktop hardware and software necessary to undertake the proposed project.

#### **Implementation plan**

The complex nature of our implementation plan is best conveyed in diagrams. Please refer to the appendix for: An overview of our Knowledge creation cycle (App 10), Technical infrastructure and data transfer (App 21), and Semi-automated process for creating web pages (App 20). The timeline for development is roughly: Year 1) New indicator development and launch of asset mapping feature, Year 2) Begin explanatory models development, continue content creation to support new indicators and mapping, and 3) Finish explanatory models, continue content creation, and disseminate findings nationally. See App 4-6 for detailed timeline of milestones and roles of key personnel.

#### **Sustainability**

This project has great potential for long-term sustainability. Local funders see our platform as essential to their business of grantmaking, and thus have begun to discuss creative solutions to long-term funding, such as applying a "data overhead" to all grants issued, or encouraging grantees to subcontract with GNOCDC for all data work. The model we are applying with collaborative work can be applied to other collaboratives under a consulting arrangement. The City, and several private-public partnerships including the CURE Foundation (see letter App 13), as well as the city's 3 largest funders (BCM, United Way, and GNOF; see letters App 23-24, 25, 26-27) have all expressed a deep commitment to sustaining our activities. And, we can subcontract with data projects in other cities to apply our infrastructure to their data allowing them to efficiently publish contextualized local data.

## UNDERSTANDING NEW ORLEANS NEIGHBORHOODS - CITATIONS

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