



ADVANCING EXCELLENCE  
AND EQUITY

2023

# Annual Report



# What is a parent?

Throughout this report, we use the term parents to describe anyone who is a child's primary caregiver. Moms, dads, aunts, uncles, siblings, grandparents, guardians, foster parents—we recognize and respect all of you as the first and most important teachers in their lives. Only together can we build a bright future for our children today and for generations to come.



## Our Mission

Illinois Action for Children is a catalyst for organizing, developing, and supporting strong families and powerful communities where children matter most.



## ACTION LEADS TO CHANGE IN 2023

To bring about purposeful change, we must take purposeful action. Our work in 2023 has certainly proven that when we take action together and stay steadfast to our mission, we can achieve remarkable results.

I am inspired by the tenacity and innovation of our team of nearly 500 and the leadership of our board of directors, who, decade after decade, have demonstrated an unwavering commitment to our mission to ensure all children in Illinois have the excellent early childhood foundation they need to fulfill their life's potential.

I am uplifted by the pivotal support of our individual donors, foundation funders, and corporate sponsors. More than 200,000 children, families, and early care and education professionals benefitted from your generosity last year.

Additionally, we have built new partnerships with the Cook County Sheriff's Office and the Stanford Center on Early Childhood. These partnerships have inspired key initiatives to address the well-being of children with jailed and incarcerated parents, and they have fueled research into other challenges facing Illinois families. The insights we've gained continue to inform the development of policies and programs to help children thrive.

After decades of fighting for an equity-centered, fully funded early childhood system—we saw historic investments in the field and the promise of a unified state agency to oversee all early childhood programming and funding.

I invite you to learn more about the impact your support has made possible through the articles and stories featured in our 2023 annual report.

Because of your commitment to our work over the years and in 2023, we are poised for transformational change.

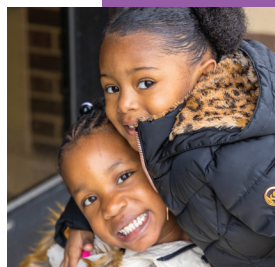
In the immortal words of Helen Keller, "Alone, we can do so little. Together we can do so much."

Thank you for inspiring us, supporting us, and partnering with us.

With gratitude,

April Janney  
CEO





# TABLE OF CONTENTS

2

What is A Parent?

3

A Letter From Our CEO

5

Highlights From Our Early Learning Programs

7

Early Childhood Emerging Leaders Fellowship

9

Strengthening Connections

11

Public Policy, Advocacy & Research Highlights

13

Impact

16

Financial Highlights

17

Thank You to Our Donors

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## EARLY LEARNING PROGRAMS



## ENGAGING THE WHOLE FAMILY

Our Early Learning Programs holistically support the children and families who need them, at every stage of a young child's development.

In fact, IAFC operates four Early Head Start and Head Start Learning Centers in south suburban Chicago Heights, Dolton, Ford Heights, and Harvey-South Holland. We also support 16 early learning partner sites with credentialed staff and other resources, and provide home visiting services for pregnant mothers and families from before birth through age three.

We know one of the most effective strategies to improve children's outcomes is to support their parents' goals for family and financial stability so they can build a better life for their families. That's why family engagement is central to our Early Learning Programs.

Dedicated Family Engagement Specialists provide an essential point of contact for parents. Our specialists share important information with parents in their preferred language and encourage them to attend family fun nights, parent meetings, peer learning, networking events, Parent Cafés, and affinity group programming. Parent Cafés guide parents in fostering positive social-emotional interactions at home, while affinity groups—such as our program for fathers and father figures—provide additional support and community for caregivers.

Leadership training workshops and the chance to serve on the Early Learning Policy Council further expand family engagement opportunities.

As parents' involvement grows, we see their children's desire to learn blossom. "It's wonderful watching engaged parents and their children lean into learning together," said Parent Involvement Coordinator Catalina Torres, "The additional support at home helps children build a foundation for lifelong learning and wellbeing."

### READYROSIE®

During the COVID-19 pandemic, we implemented a home-based curriculum to continue children's learning while away from the classroom. The research-based family engagement curriculum ReadyRosie® was so successful that we decided to continue using the program long-term. ReadyRosie builds important connections between learning in the classroom and at home. Families receive mobile-friendly ReadyRosie Modeled Moments videos, filmed in English and Spanish, on class-aligned study topics that enhance skills, learning, and behaviors, and prepare children for success in kindergarten and beyond!



# SUPPORT FOR PARENTS BENEFITS CHILDREN

At IAFC, we pride ourselves on a two-generation approach to care. We strongly believe that, for children to thrive, their parents must receive the necessary resources to achieve their goals and give their family the best possible chance to succeed.

That's why the Early Learning team listened closely when Monesia Camper, a parent whose son attended our Early Learning Center in Chicago Heights, shared her personal struggle and a desire to become more involved in her son's early education. Monesia joined the Early Learning Policy Council, one of many opportunities Early Learning Programs offer parents to build their confidence and leadership skills. Eventually, she was elected to the position of the council's chairperson. Beyond the benefits she anticipated, Monesia found her participation and the connections to peers an avenue of support during a challenging time for her family.

"It's been a privilege to serve as Chair of the Early Learning Policy Council and travel to Dallas for the National Head Start Association Conference," said Monesia. "I got the chance to learn strategies to support children's well-being in traumatic situations, which was personally helpful, too."

“

**I am forever grateful to IAFC  
for playing a key role in my  
family's healing process.”**





## EARLY CHILDHOOD EMERGING LEADERS FELLOWSHIP



### INAUGURAL FELLOWSHIP CLASS GAIN VALUABLE SKILLS

Society undervalues early childhood professionals. From center administrators and educators to family engagement specialists, the dedicated staff caring for and educating our youngest learners receive some of the lowest wages in the field.

To sustain a qualified workforce, we must uplift early childhood professionals through fair wages, professional development, and continuous advocacy.

In June 2022, we launched the Early Childhood Emerging Leaders Fellowship to support mid-level early childhood educators who live and work primarily in under-resourced communities across Illinois upskill and gain a voice in the industry.

The Fellowship is part of the Maria Whelan Leadership Institute, which works to strengthen the early childhood workforce through educator engagement and professional development.

The inaugural cohort of 22 highly motivated early learning professionals spent nine

months participating in expert-led skill-building workshops, panels, and projects aimed at career advancement and developing advocacy leadership in early childhood. Training topics included values-based leadership, public policy and systems change, goal setting, coalition-building, fundraising, and project management.

The Fellows also created individualized leadership development plans, spent a day in Springfield, and collaborated on a group advocacy project.

By the time they graduated from the program in February 2023, one-third of the Fellows had received promotions or obtained new, higher-level positions, which they attributed directly to their participation in the program.

The second cohort of 19 Fellows began in June 2023 and included an integrated mentorship component to deepen their experience in the Fellowship.



# FELLOWSHIP GRADUATES DESCRIBE THE VALUE OF THE PROGRAM



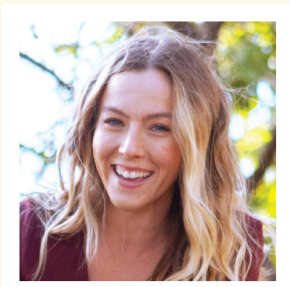
## Elevating Skills & Confidence

“Through the Fellowship, I grew to believe in myself and my professional and academic worth. After completion, I applied for a higher position within a new district. Now I’m supervising a team.” – **Tiffany P.**



## Instilling Vision

“I am exploring the idea of starting a nonprofit organization to create a safe space for teachers to focus on themselves and their personal well-being. The Fellowship opened my eyes to so many possibilities.” – **Diamond H.**



## Building Networks

“The program revealed all the ways professionals can become impactful leaders. It’s essential because it builds critical connections between emergent early childhood leaders who might not otherwise cross paths.” – **Natalia A.**



## Unlocking Leadership Potential

“I thought I wasn’t good enough to lead. But now know I have what it takes to hold my head up and believe in my capabilities. I will be an early childhood leader for years to come.” – **Maria N.**



## Advocating for Everyone

“The Fellowship helped me find my voice regarding challenges in early childhood education. By speaking to legislators, other women in positions of power, and cohort fellows, I’ve learned that my voice actually matters.” – **Tamika H.**



## STRENGTHENING CONNECTIONS



### STRENGTHENING CONNECTIONS BUILDS EQUITY AND POSITIVE PARENT/CHILD BONDS

In Illinois, approximately 200,000 children, including 37,000 in Chicago alone, experience having a jailed or incarcerated parent.\* For them, parental separation can have lasting and devastating effects, including poor outcomes and sleeping issues; greater risk of mental health conditions including depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, and substance use disorder; lower educational attainment; and higher rates of involvement with the juvenile justice system.

Children with jailed and incarcerated parents continue to slip through the cracks, even though they were identified by the state in 2021 as a group needing significant attention and services.

In response, we have developed an innovative pilot program to foster positive connections between children (0-18) and their jailed/incarcerated parents and to build resilience in families with children ages five and younger.

Through Strengthening Connections, IAFC partners with the Cook County Sheriff's Office and its family CARES team to offer quarterly events in a welcoming environment for jailed parents and their children. The events allow parents to dress in street clothes and interact freely with their children—without bars or glass separations—for positive bonding experiences.

In 2024, we will launch case management for families with children ages five and under. Provided by licensed social workers, case management will promote family stability and help families access supportive services and resources, including early childhood programs that have extensive experience caring for and educating children living through trauma.

In partnership with the civic and social impact design firm ChiByDesign, IAFC developed a process to better understand the challenges incarceration-impacted families face and co-created interventions to address them.

Workshops engaged formerly incarcerated parents, children of formerly incarcerated parents, caregivers, family support organizations, and other key participants across the justice and child welfare systems to:

- Uncover the conditions, policies, practices, and experiences that disconnect children and their families from incarcerated parents.
- Develop interventions that foster positive, equitable connections between incarcerated parents, their children, and those who care for them.

Read the Report "Strengthening Family Connections"—to learn about the 22 identified barriers to building strong family connections and recommended interventions for incarceration-impacted families.

Visit <https://www.actforchildren.org/program-supports/family-community-impact/program-supports-strengthening-connections/> to get the report and learn more about this critical program.

**\*Note:** Jailed refers to individuals held short-term, waiting for trial; **incarcerated** indicates those convicted and serving a sentence.



# STRENGTHENING CONNECTIONS AND BUILDING BONDS

Many of the jailed parents participating in Strengthening Connections cherish these special opportunities to bond with their children.



**Carl S.** felt a lack of positive energy before joining the program. He approached the day with an “*open mind*” and seeing the bright faces of his little girls as they “*read books, played games, and took pictures*” together made a big difference.



**Jorge E.** wasn’t sure about the rules—could they hug? However, spending time with his son took him back to “*the old days.*” They played games, took photos, and “*had a great time.*”



**Gilberto S.** was unsure of how his children would react, but they played games without separation bars or glass. “*Time was most important. It was an unforgettable moment,*” he shared.



**Jahrod J.** missed his daughter and was excited to spend time playing and reading with her. Jahrod also enjoyed being a “*babysitter watching everyone’s kids.*” As for the experience with his little girl, “*We got closer. It was hard for her to say goodbye,*” he expressed.



**Adam F.** had no physical contact with his child, even when he was a newborn. At the event, he cradled his son in his arms for the first time, read to him and fed him his bottle. “*It was the only real chance I had to interact with my child.*”

Numerous studies indicate that positive bonding opportunities for jailed parents and their children in safe, open spaces—like the ones we offer—are the most effective way to reduce the harmful effects of parental incarceration on families.



## EARLY LEARNING ADVOCATES WIN BIG

Through the tireless work of advocates, 2023 was an outstanding year for early childhood education and care (ECEC) in Illinois!

At the forefront of early childhood advocacy in Illinois for decades, our Public Policy and Advocacy team was instrumental in ensuring Smart Start Illinois, Governor J.B. Pritzker's historic multiyear plan to transform the state's early childhood system, was codified into law. Now the team is focused on ensuring the plan's provisions will be equity-centered, optimally funded, and well-developed to truly meet the needs of children, families, and the ECEC workforce.

Building and training a movement of leading parent and provider advocates, as co-founder and anchor of We, The Village (WTV) Coalition, was pivotal to the team's success.

Through the team's focused efforts, legislators heard directly from mothers and fathers sharing their challenges as they tried to navigate the complexities of finding accessible, affordable, high-quality ECEC programs of their choice.



Parent voices are the focus of our Research department's initiative to learn about the challenges facing families after the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2023, the Research team initiated a partnership with RAPID at the Stanford Center on Early Childhood to conduct quarterly surveys with hundreds of Illinois parents. Parents are paid a small stipend to share their thoughts and experiences on a range of topics, including child care, health, and family wellbeing.

We conducted the first of four planned surveys in fall 2023 with 350 diverse parents from seven counties--Cook, DuPage, Kane, Kendall, McHenry, Lake, and Will.

This essential data will be shared with the public and legislators and will help inform our future programming and advocacy work.



## “INVISIBLE” DISABILITY INSPIRES MOM TO BECOME A PASSIONATE ADVOCATE

Kristen's daughter, Annalisa, received a diagnosis of developmental delays, early intervention services, and an Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP). However, when transitioning from Head Start to kindergarten at Chicago Public Schools (CPS), Annalisa was denied services because her special needs were not visually apparent. At the same time, Kristen and her husband noticed her youngest son, Juan, was showing signs of developmental delay, too.

A stay-at-home mom, Kristen wanted to help change the policies preventing children from getting the supportive services they need to succeed. That's when she joined the Illinois Early Learning Council's (ELC) Family Advisory Committee (FAC).

As a member of the FAC, she works with advocacy organizations like Illinois Action for Children to fight for equity and the educational rights of children with disabilities in the early childhood system.

Inspired by her participation, Kristen returned to school and earned an associate's degree in child development. She is working on a bachelor's degree in early childhood education and is a literacy tutor for CPS.



“

**My children see their mom fighting every day on their behalf. Being a part of the FAC helps my kids, but it also helps kids and parents throughout the state see how important parents' voices are. They see that their voices matter, and they can bring about change.”**

## Children and Families in Illinois Are Counting on Us.

We work with each generation to provide children with access to high-quality early childhood programs, which enables their parents to join the labor force. However, many of the working parents who participate in our programs still struggle to make ends meet for their families.

In 2023 we supported the following groups:

Families

**77,651**

Children

**102,404**

Providers

**23,272**

Total

**203,327**

Single Mothers

**55,642**

Single Fathers

**4,018**

Living at/or Below  
Federal Poverty Level\*

**27,583**

Unhoused

**338**

Children with  
Special Needs

**816**

Race/Ethnicity

Hispanic

**25,871**

**25%**

African American

**54,176**

**53%**

White

**8,745**

**9%**

Asian

**2,921**

**3%**

Other/Unknown

**10,700**

**10%**

Why Our Families  
Need Child Care:



Work

**99%**



TANF

Education/Training

**<1%**



Non TANF

Education/Training

**<1%**



Work & Education

**<1%**

*\*All families served meet income eligibility requirements to receive Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) support and/or other public assistance such as Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF).*



# YOUR IMPACT IS REAL

The impact of your generosity is transformational, which enables us to deliver 26 unique programs, advocacy, and research, and foster equity to support children's learning and growth during the most critical years in their development.

## Early Learning Programs

“

I can remember like yesterday, taking my baby to the doctor for his first well-baby check and running into an IAFC table. They made it impossible for me not to enroll. With the help of my Family Engagement Specialist, I was able to have my son and get him into an early intervention program. The way the program advocated for my son and my concerns cannot be forgotten or compared. He is three years into the program and is excelling.”

### Our Reach

- ✓ **1,135** Families Enrolled
- ✓ **1,165** Children Attending
- ✓ **833** Mothers
- ✓ **852** Single Parent Families

*Numbers reflect IAFC Early Learning Centers, Early Learning Partner Sites, and Home Visiting.*

## Emerging Leaders Fellowship

### IT'S A FACT

One-third of the inaugural fellows reported receiving a promotion or securing a new, higher level/higher salaried position with more responsibility, which they directly attribute to their participation in the Fellowship!



**62**

candidate applications received

### Race/Ethnicity

**80%**

identify as African American, Hispanic or multiracial

### Geography

**21**

Zip Codes across Illinois represented

# PUBLIC POLICY AND ADVOCACY IMPACT

IAFC's Public Policy and Advocacy team achieved big wins in 2023, mobilizing more than 6,000 parents, early childhood education and care (ECEC) professionals, and community members. These advocates routinely respond to advocacy alerts, testify, and act on critical issues. Their accomplishments include:



## \$5 million

New funding to support inclusion in schools and community-based early childhood settings for preschoolers with disabilities and developmental delays.



## 900% ↑

Percentage increase in number of higher education students receiving Early Childhood Access Consortium for Equity (ECACE) Scholarships from 400 in 2021 to 4,000 in 2023.



## \$170 million

Increase in state's investment in child care services, to add more families through Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP), raise ECEC workforce wages and system upgrades that make it easier for parents to apply for CCAP.

## Our Advocates in Action:



On April 18, 2023, 323 parent and provider advocates from the We, The Village Coalition (managed by IAFC) and its partner coalitions traveled to Springfield for our first in person Advocacy Day in three years! Together, we rallied—urging legislators to prioritize Illinois' youngest residents.

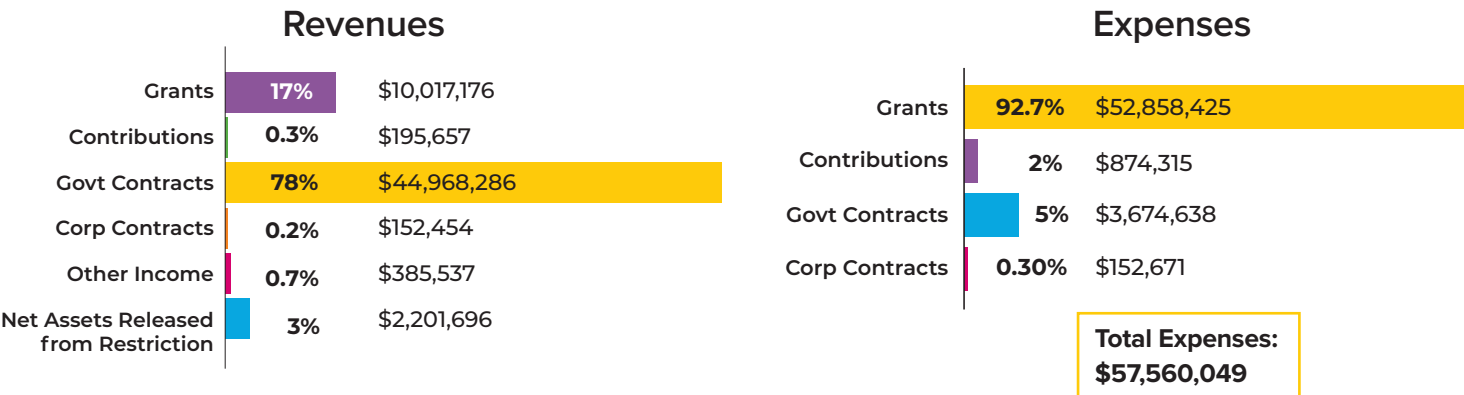
IAFC's CEO April Janney had the honor of introducing Governor J.B. Pritzker, who promoted Smart Start Illinois and other ECEC initiatives to rousing cheers from the crowd.



# WE VALUE AND WILL USE EVERY GIFT WISELY.

We're proud of the integrity with which we conduct every aspect of our work—and our organization's finances are no exception. Fiscal transparency and stability are the hallmarks that make us a wise and mindful steward of your gifts.

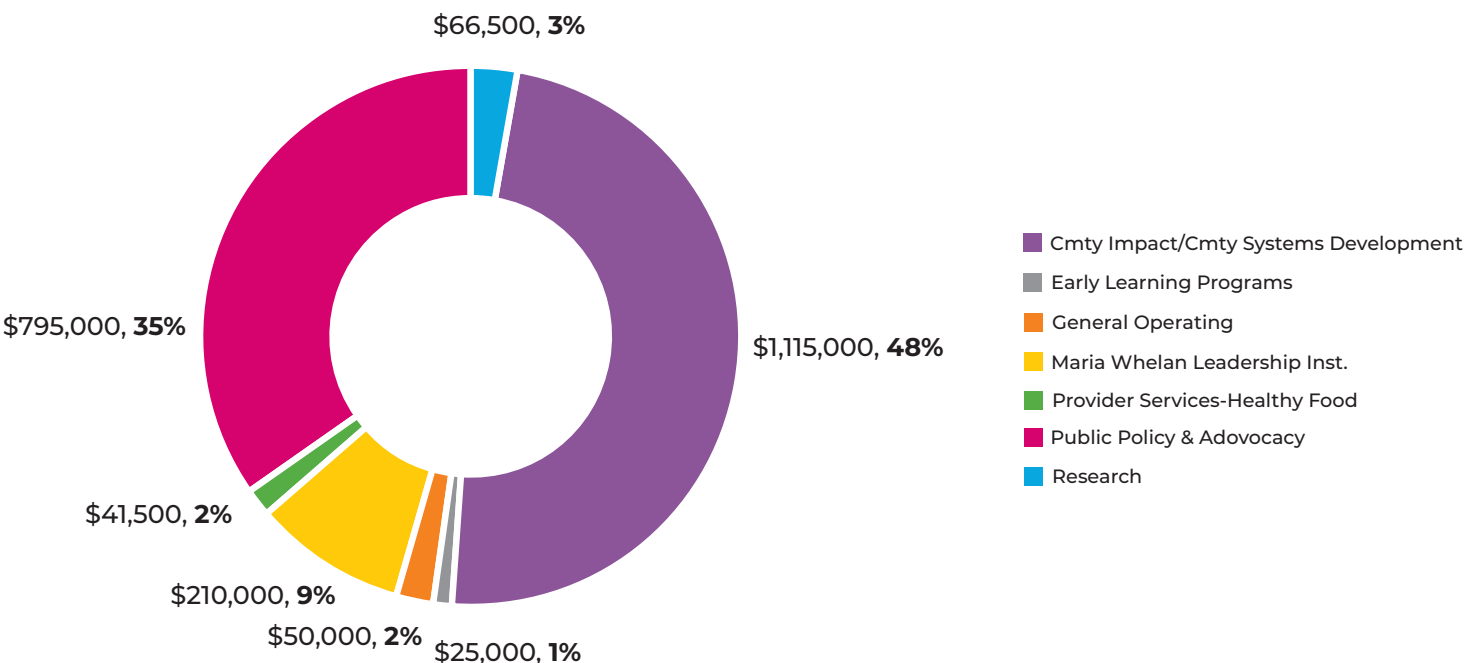
## Fiscal Year 2023 Audited Financial Highlights



## Your Giving is key to building a bright future for our children.

Your gifts ensure every Illinois resident has equitable access to the experiences and resources they need to succeed.

Private philanthropy and individual donations allow us to seize new opportunities to be responsive to the evolving early childhood landscape, and to fill in gaps that cannot be adequately addressed by government funding alone.



# YOUR GENEROSITY IN ACTION IN 2023!

We are pleased to share the positive impact your support made in the lives of more than 200,000 children, families, early childhood professionals, and community leaders who are striving to rise above the challenges of poverty and inequity. Every gift matters. YOU matter. THANK YOU!



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◆ Indicates matching gift; ★ Indicates Board member; ■ Indicates former Board member



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2023 Donors from January 1-December 31, 2023 are listed.

◆ Indicates matching gift; ★ Indicates Board member; ■ Indicates former Board member



## OUR VISION

We envision a world in which every child experiences an abundance of support from the start, including:

- An early learning system that offers **families** choices, and provides **access** to the highest-**quality**, most affordable educational **opportunities**.
- Widely **available**, supportive community **services** and family **resources** that help **children** to thrive at school and at home.
- Ample investments to **equip**, **develop**, and **compensate** early childhood **professionals** to prepare the next generation and lead the field with skill and agility.

As the early childhood landscape and family needs change, we will remain nimble, adaptable, and responsive to shifts in learning and care. We invite everyone who shares this vision to join us!

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*"Illinois Action for Children is a catalyst for organizing, developing and supporting strong families and powerful communities where children matter most."*



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