

The Washington Health Workforce Sentinel Network

Spring 2026 Findings from Behavioral Health Organizations

HCA Children & Youth Behavioral Health Work Group Meeting
July 15, 2026

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Center for Health Workforce Studies



Washington's Health Workforce Sentinel Network

Partnership between

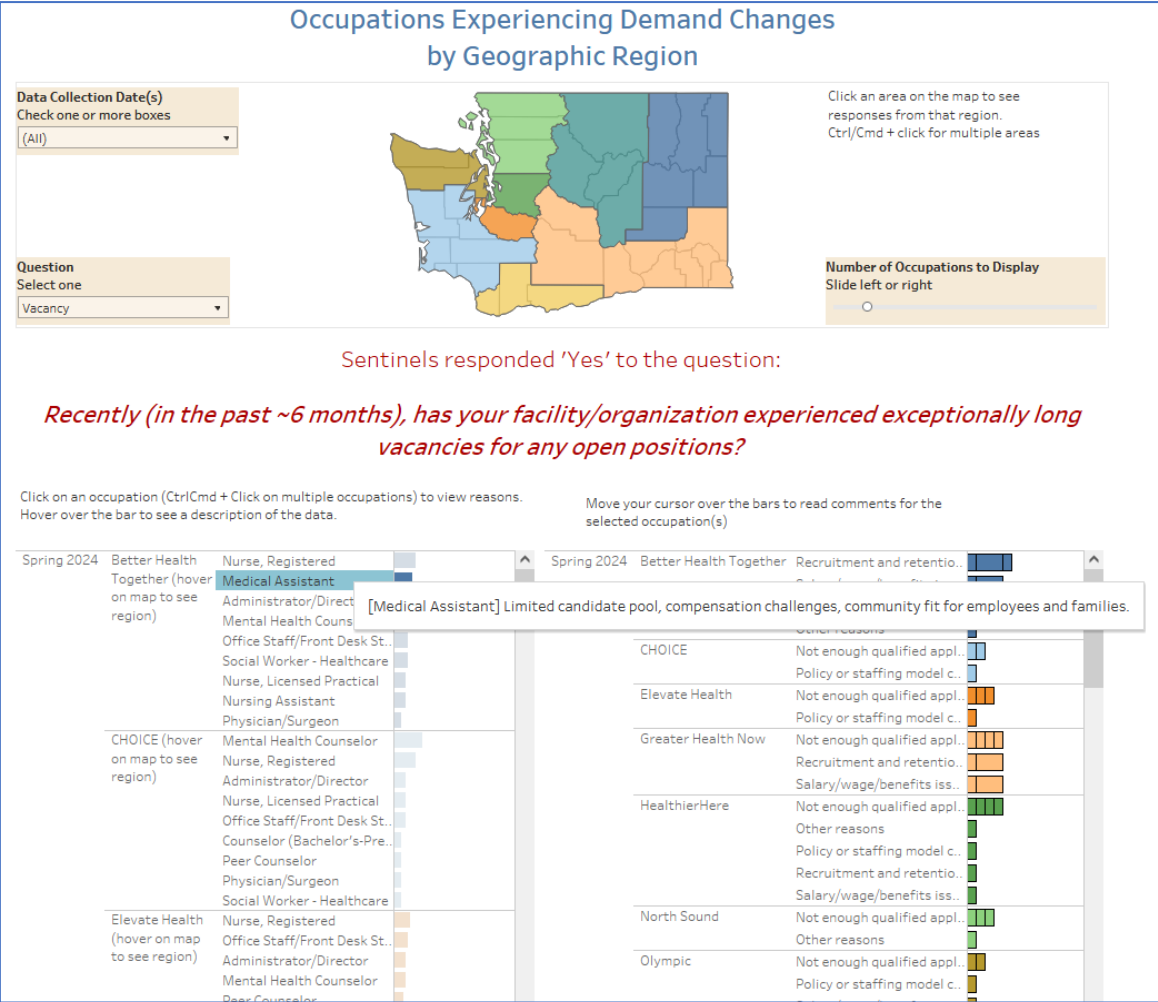
- Washington Workforce Training & Education Coordinating Board
- University of Washington Center for Health Workforce Studies

Funding provided by the Washington State Legislature

Employers and hiring managers surveyed once per year

Focus on identifying emerging **signals and trends** over time

Dashboards



Findings Briefs



Our most recent data collection effort

Spring 2026 data collection: April 6 – May 4

Topics covered:

- Vacancies and turnover for each facility
- Organizational priorities and challenges
- Modules
 - Behavioral health organizations (peer counselors)
 - Primary care (recruitment and retention)
 - Long-term care

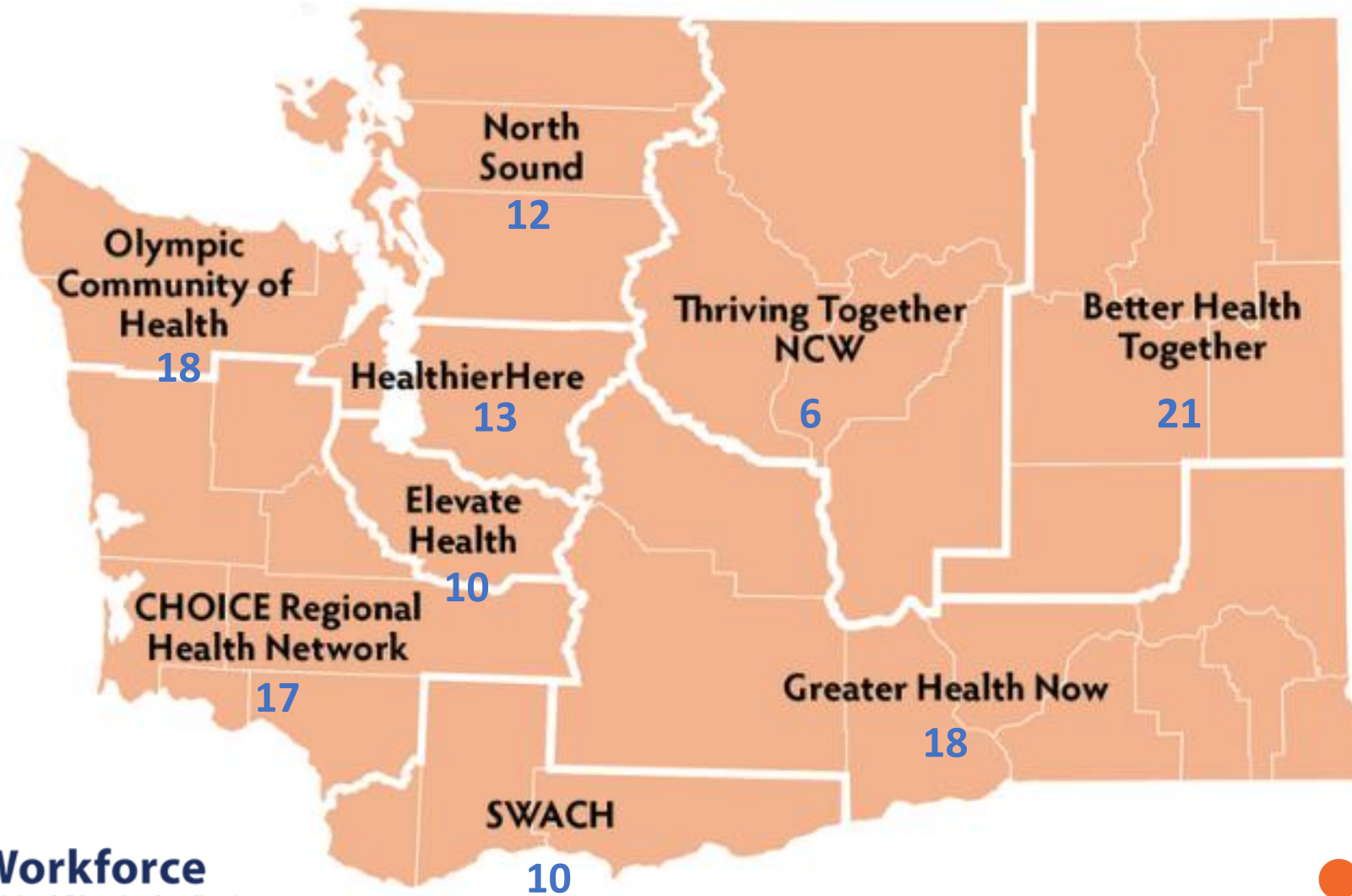
Statewide responses by facility type - Spring 2026

Facility Type	#
Hospitals	20
BH - Behavioral health agency - WA DOH certified	27
BH - Behavioral health clinic or practice	16
BH - Freestanding evaluation & treatment facility	4
BH - Other outpatient behavioral health organization	6
BH - Psychiatric/substance use treatment hospital or psychiatric unit in a hospital	4
BH - Secure withdrawal management facility	2
BH - Substance use disorder residential treatment facility	3
Dentist office/dental clinic	32
Federally qualified health center (FQHC) or community clinic providing care free or on sliding fee scale	16
Higher education/research organization	16
Home health or hospice	8
K-12 school	16
Long-term care facility	24
Medical/diagnostic laboratory	11
Pharmacy	17
Primary care medical clinic (not FQHC/community clinic or rural health clinic)	5
Public health organization	8
Rural health clinic	14
Specialty medical clinic or other	12
Total	261

62 responses from
behavioral health
organizations

Number of responses by Accountable Community of Health (ACH)

Behavioral health organizations - Spring 2026



Findings from Behavioral Health Organizations

Spring 2026

Top Occupations with Exceptionally Long Vacancies

Behavioral Health Facilities*

Rank	Spring 2022	Fall 2022	Spring 2023	Fall 2023	Spring 2024	Spring 2025	Spring 2026	← Most cited
1	Mental health counselor	Mental health counselor	Mental health counselor	Mental health counselor	Mental health counselor	Mental health counselor	Mental health counselor	
2	Substance use disorder professional	SUDP	Substance use disorder professional	Substance use disorder professional	Substance use disorder professional	Substance use disorder professional	Substance use disorder professional	
		Registered nurse						
		Peer counselor						
3	Social worker (Mental health/SUDP)	Social worker (Mental health/SUDP)	Registered nurse	Social worker (Mental health/SUDP)	Counselor – Bachelor’s prepared	Social worker (Mental health/SUDP)	Social worker (Mental health/SUDP)	
4	Marriage & family therapist	Marriage & family therapist	Marriage & family therapist	Marriage & family therapist	Marriage & family therapist	Counselor – Bachelor’s prepared	Registered nurse	
					Office personnel			

Reasons for Exceptionally Long Vacancies

Limited rural labor pools: finding the right credential level can be a challenge

"Difficult to find people with this credential [SUDP] in our rural area, trying to grow them internally with education and advancement opportunities."

Licensure and credentialing delays: complicates staffing mix

"Processing licenses for new Mental Health Counselor (typically associates) has been quite delayed. Until they are MHPs, we cannot easily fill their caseload..."

Compensation pressures: wage expectations and competition

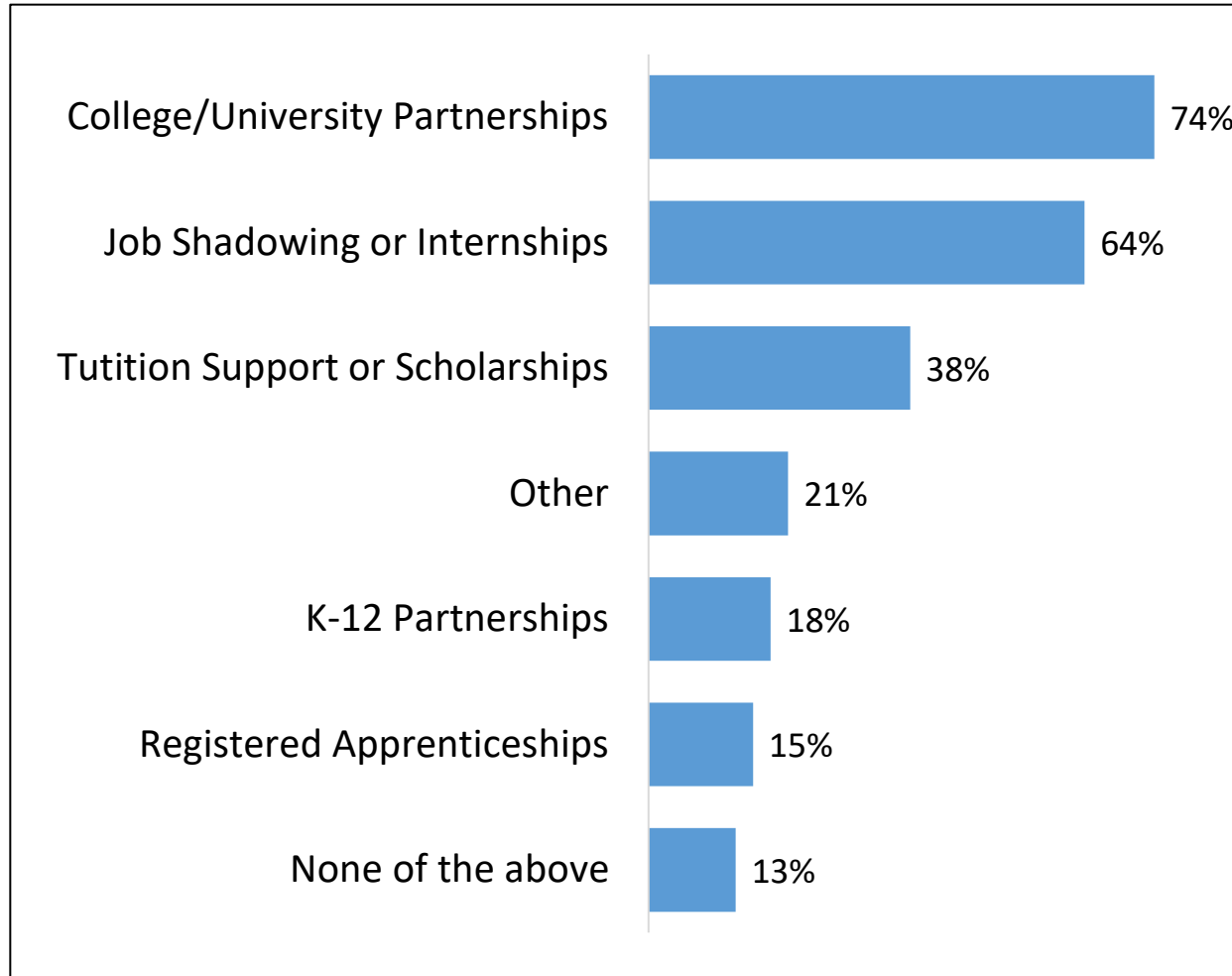
"Most Master's level, licensed clinicians accept positions at hospitals, large healthcare providers or in the private sector for higher pay."

Underdeveloped training pipelines: especially for master's level positions

"We have begun recruiting students in master's programs to be Mental Health Case Managers who can work for us while in school and become an MHC and get supervision hours with us after graduation."

Strategies for Pipeline and Early-Career Development

Which of the following workforce outreach, pipeline development, or early-career development strategies does your organization support? (check all that apply)



"Almost exclusively... for people pursuing Master's degrees or who are currently in a Master's program who need their practicum."

"We currently provide tuition reimbursement and have partnered with several colleges to expand educational opportunities for staff through tuition assistance."

Reasons for Retention Challenges

Employers report turnover is often due to employees seeking:

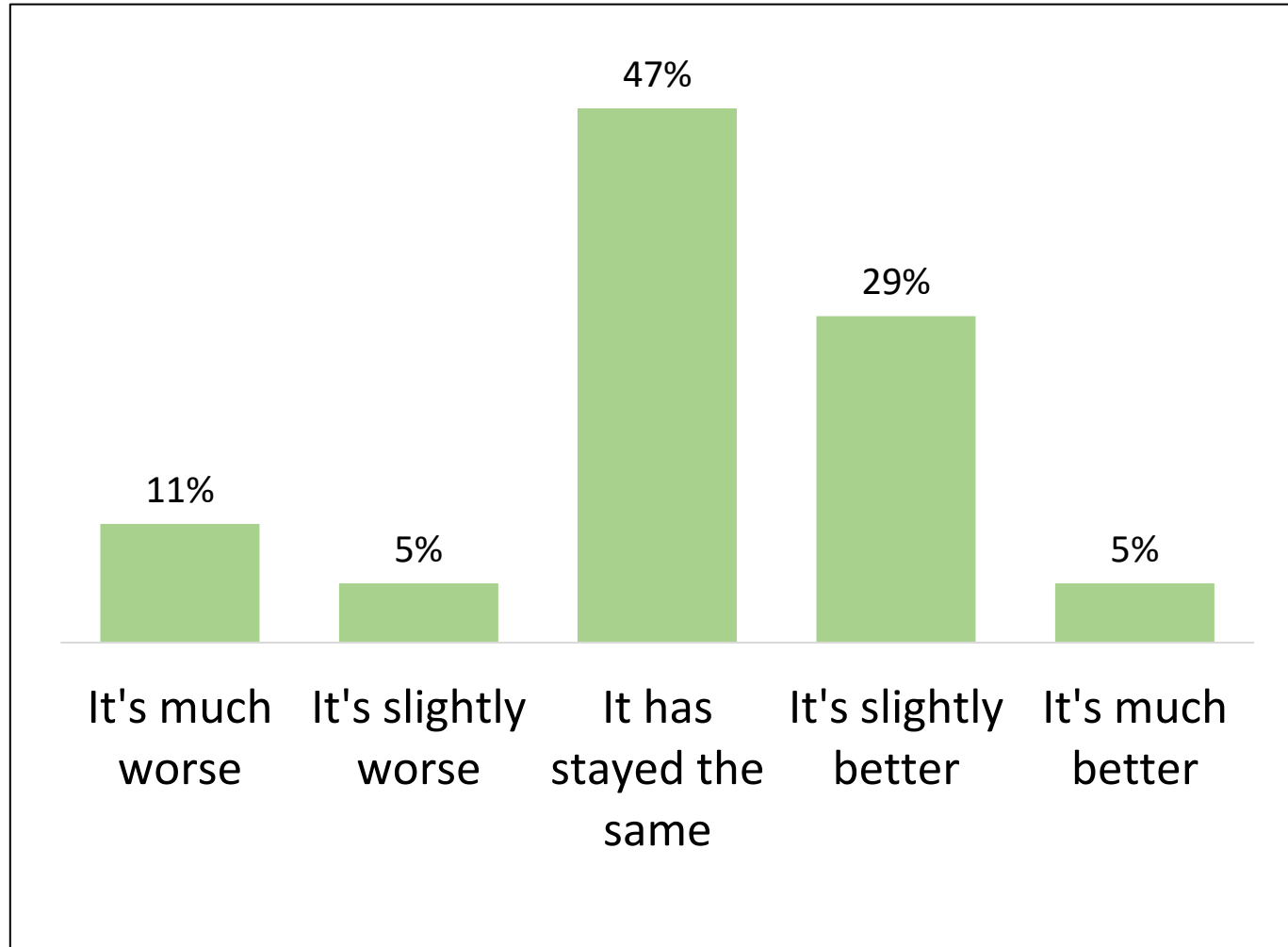
- Higher wages
- Less acute patient population
- Different working environment

“Low pay in relation to educational requirements, long hours, burnout”

“We often see that people who become fully licensed will leave for private practice, telehealth companies, higher pay, etc.”

Ability to Staff the Facility

In the past year, how has your organization's ability to staff your facility changed?



"[It's stayed the same] At times it can be hard to hire therapists, mostly due to the lack of wage growth in this field, given insurance reimbursement rate stagnation."

"[It's slightly better] We've been able to retain most staff, and several associate providers became fully licensed, which leads to a pay increase at our agency."

New Technology and AI Adoption

Has your organization adopted, or is it considering adopting, any new or existing technology?

Approximately 70% of respondents from behavioral health facilities reported adopting or considering new technologies, including AI tools.

Use of AI included: clinical documentation, scribing, transcription, billing, scheduling, administrative tasks, and EHR workflows. Respondents were generally positive, though some remain cautious.

- *"AI note taking assistant. It has been positive for both staff and patients."*
- *"I contract with a company that... has launched an AI program that audits charts to ensure the notes are in compliance with insurer demands. I don't like it because I don't think it is appropriate to use AI in real-time for health care and related administrative purposes. I don't think AI is ready for this sensitive work with vulnerable people's deeply personal medical records (psychiatry)."*

Peer Counselors

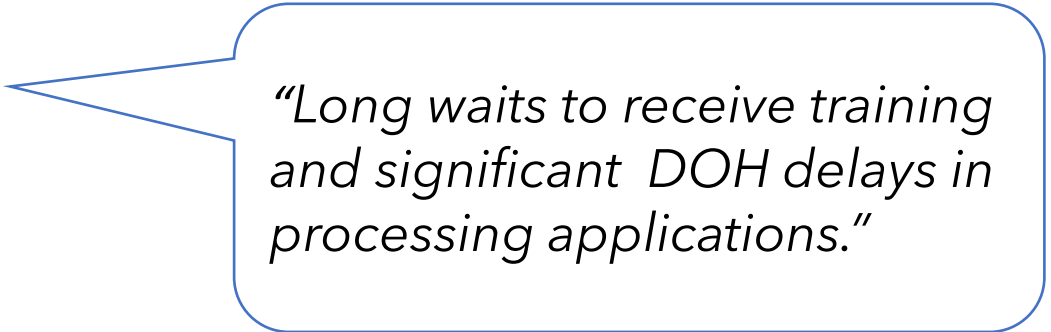
Peer Counselors – Number of responses and certification

Does your organization employ peer counselors or certified peer support specialists (peers)?

- A total of **26** respondents answered yes to this question

Within the past year, has your organization experienced challenges with employees receiving the new certified peer support specialist or trainee specialist credential from the Department of Health?

39% of respondents said yes
(9 of 23 who applied for the credential)



“Long waits to receive training and significant DOH delays in processing applications.”

Peer Counselors – Supervision and roles

Have you had any challenges providing an approved supervisor for certified peer support specialist trainees?

26% said yes (5 of 19 who employ trainees)

What types of trainings or technical assistance would support you in maintaining or growing your organization's peer program?

- *“We would benefit from guidance on peer role clarity and boundaries, effective supervision structures for peer staff, and strategies to integrate peers into multidisciplinary teams.”*
- *“Ethics and boundaries in peer support and peer scope of practice as well as recruiting/hiring/retention.”*

Thank you!

Visit: <https://wa.sentinelnetwork.org/> or



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