

2023 ANNUAL REPORT

SOUTHERN ECONOMIC ADVANCEMENT PROJECT

Together, Progress is Possible



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FROM THE DESK OF EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

As we bid farewell to 2023 and welcome the opportunities of 2024, I am filled with a sense of pride and anticipation. The past year has been a defining period for the Southern Economic Advancement Project (<u>SEAP</u>), and we are poised to build on this momentum in the year ahead.

Our journey since SEAP's inception in 2019 has been transformative, guided by our unwavering commitment to addressing the critical intersection of race, class, and gender within social and economic policies in the South. The resilience and adaptability demonstrated by our team and partners, especially in the face of the ongoing global challenges, have been nothing short of inspirational. Our growing efforts in federal funding strive toward an equitable recovery and resilience in our communities. Our reach and impact, which saw significant expansion last year, are a testament to the collective power of shared goals and unified action.

SEAP has significantly amplified its impact through strategic partnerships and pivotal engagements, including the *Pandemic to Prosperity* series, a continued partnership with the Building Our Future coalition in New Orleans, and federal engagement with agencies such as the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services and the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau. Our involvement extends to national recognition, with an invitation by the US Treasury, where we offered our insights during the *Catalyzing an Equitable Economic Recovery* meeting with the American Rescue Plan Team.

As we step into 2024, the launch of our "Our Dollars, Our Dreams" campaign is set to be a major focus. This initiative will empower communities across the South to harness federal funding for sustainable and equitable development. Moreover, we are excited about the upcoming SouthStrong Policy Entrepreneur Program, which promises to bring new energy and insights to our network.

I am deeply grateful for your continued support and belief in our mission. Your partnership is the backbone of our success and the driving force behind our ambitious vision for the South. Together, we are not only envisioning but actively crafting a more equitable and prosperous future.

-Sarah Beth Gehl

SEAP'S FOUNDATION

SEAP, founded in 2019 by Stacey Abrams, partners with policy thinkers and doers to amplify their efforts and bridge gaps in policy infrastructure. SEAP's goal is to advance policies that improve economic security, healthcare access, and environmental justice for all Southerners—acting as a connector, convener, and policy entrepreneur across issues and states, translating good ideas to the Southern context.

We support the efforts of existing organizations and networks that work towards broadening economic power and building a more equitable future. Broadening economic power brings attention to how race, class and gender intersect social and economic policy in the South. We explore policy ideas designed to directly address these connections.

THE SOUTH SEAP SERVES



SEAP focuses on 12 Southern states and the most marginalized/vulnerable communities in Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia, West Virginia, Georgia, Kentucky, and Louisiana.

WHY THE SOUTH

NEW FEDERAL DATA HIGHLIGHTS WHY OUR NATION'S POLICY Focus must be on the south

Source: Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, Consumer Finances in Rural Areas of the Southern Region



Southern states.

in these Southern states. 70% of the US's rural Black population lives in 8

Nearly half of the nation's persistently poor counties

(poverty rates of 20% or more for the last 30 years) are



Mississippi and **Louisiana** have the highest unbanked rates in the nation.



27% of mortgage applications in the rural South are denied compared to 11% denied nationally. For persistently poor rural Southern counties, applicants are nearly **4 times** more likely to be denied.



9% of mortgage loans went to rural Black borrowers in the South between 2018-2021 even though they represent **24% of the rural population** in the South.



A high credit score Black borrower in the rural South will experience a **17% denial rate** for mortgage loans compared to a 9% denial rate for a high credit score white rural borrower.



28% of rural Southerners have a medical debt collection on their credit report compared to 17% of consumers nationally. Meaning... new policies on how medical debt will be reported on credit reports will help rural Southerners the most!

POLICY AREAS

Economic Security: 13% of Southern households went hungry in June 2023. The highest rates of hunger nationwide were in LA (19%), MS (18%), and AR (17%).

Climate: 81% of Southerners live in counties that have experienced at least one FEMA-declared disaster since 2020.

Health: 15% of working-age Southerners lack health insurance, compared to 11% in non-Southern states.

OUR APPROACH

SEAP's mission is to ensure the people are first and equity is centered. Our team's approach to driving policy change in the South includes **civic voice**, **capacity building**, and **research**. SEAP's approach is comprehensive, leveraging research and community collaboration for impactful advocacy.

THE SEAP TEAM



Sarah Beth Gehl
Executive Director



Dede Dunham Communications Manager



Liza Crichton
Federal Resources Coordinator



Genny Castillo
Deputy Director



Emily Roberts
Engagement Coordinator



Fenika Miller Economic Recovery Corps Fellow

2023 Scholars, Consultants and Interns

Dr. Allison Bridges, Georgia Tech Dr. Elora Raymond, Georgia Tech Lilli Jackson, Medicaid Unwinding Consultant Leila Pedersen, ARP Consultant Sierra Scott, Georgia Tech Jade Clyne, Data Fellow Aarti Sharma, *Our Dollars, Our Dreams Consultant* Monica Obregon, Intern, *University of Texas at Austin* Evelyn De La Cruz, Intern, *University of California* Eliana Streeter, Intern, *San Jacinto College* Angela Martinez, Intern

SIGNIFICANT UPDATES

SEAP TRANSITIONS TO TIDES CENTER AS NEW FISCAL SPONSOR

As we strive to advance economic empowerment and prosperity in the Southern region, this partnership with Tides will enable us to enhance our financial management and administrative support. Tides has a stellar reputation for its commitment to social justice and innovative approaches to nonprofit management. This collaboration will allow us to streamline our operations, allocate resources more efficiently, and focus our efforts on creating lasting impacts within our communities.

SEAP CREATES 3-YEAR STRATEGIC PLAN

SEAP completed its first strategic plan in June 2023, a milestone achievement shaped by a collaborative project from February to June 2023. The plan will guide our work and growth over the next three years. The planning process featured internal reviews, program analyses, and extensive stakeholder engagement through interviews and staff retreats. The resulting strategic plan sets clear priorities and objectives, charting SEAP's path to advancing economic equity in the South.



HOW SEAP SEEKS IMPACT IN - AND FOR - SOUTHERN STATES

| MISSION / PURPOSE | STRATEGY | SHORT-TERM OUTCOMES | LONG-TERM OUTCOMES | |
|--|-----------------|--|---|--|
| SEAP partners with policy thinkers and doers to amplify their efforts and bridge gaps in policy infrastructure. SEAP's goal is to advance policies that improve economic security, healthcare access, and environmental justice for all Southerners- acting as a connector, convener, and policy entrepreneur across issues and states, translating good ideas to the Southern context. | (See next page) | Nonprofit organizations and local governments are better able to achieve their goals through SEAP's research, tools, and connections. With support from a sound nonprofit ecosystem, progressive policy infrastructure is functioning across Southern states. The civic voice of Southerners facing inequities is being elevated, spotlighting need and opportunity. | State and local policies that bring resources and solutions to address Southerners' economic, health, and environmental needs are being implemented. The federal government, philanthropy, and major donors are prioritizing the South in policy development and decision-making. | |
| IMPACT Marginalized and vulnerable people living in the South are able to equitably advance. | | | | |

THE AMERICAN RESCUE PLAN

ARP in Action Success Stories

Building on its efforts to track American Rescue Plan (ARP) spending and provide resources through its ARP Toolkit, SEAP researched all corners of the South to tell the stories of <u>ARP</u> <u>in Action</u>, highlighting leaders' equitable spending of recovery funds. At the request of our partners, these one-pagers highlighted how these dollars impacted programs and assistance for domestic abuse victims, community violence prevention projects, workforce development, energy efficiency and weatherization, affordable housing, food security, as well as education, children and youth. Through this project, SEAP partnered with New Disabled South to share <u>ARP in Action for the Disability Community</u> success stories. This resource highlights how local leaders allocate ARP funds to create fair and inclusive communities across the South.

Strategies for Organizers

SEAP authored <u>Organizing for Federal Funds: Case Studies from Southern Organizers</u>, which tells the story of how eight organizations took the initiative to educate and organize their communities to advocate for equitable allocation and implementation of the ARP State and Local Fiscal Recovery Funding (SLFRF). These inspiring stories of action and impact shed light on how people can work together through coordinated strategies to ensure the needs of the most impacted are centered on implementing federal funding programs now and moving forward. Additionally, SEAP released an updated Activist Guide to ARP and hosted presentations to spread awareness.



In January 2023, SEAP's Executive Director, Sarah Beth Gehl, was invited to Washington, D.C., to provide input into the US Treasury and the White House American Rescue Plan Team's Catalyzing an Equitable Economic Recovery meeting.

THE AMERICAN RESCUE PLAN

THE SEAP IMPACT

SEAP ARP GRANT RECIPIENTS BOOST COMMUNITY ARP ADVOCACY

SEAP awarded \$50,000 in grants to six Southern non-profits to encourage the equitable distribution of ARP recovery funds.

- SOWEGA Rising and Georgia ACT partnered to launch the 3V (Vote, Vaccines, and Vision) Liberation Tour. The "vision" portion of the tour included town hall meetings in 42 different cities throughout South GA to engage community members and make them aware of ARP funds.
- Congress of Latino Organizations effectively mobilized communities for the maximum use of ARP funds by focusing on making complex information digestible. Their efforts led to vital achievements: a \$20m investment in Forsyth for essential community services and a \$9m allocation for affordable housing in Cary, Wake County.
- Engage Miami collected surveys from community members to identify what services residents would like to see that would increase the usage of their public library. They collected more than 500 surveys via digital and inperson outreach. Findings were shared with County staff and commissioners.

ARP TOOLKIT HELPS MISSISSIPPI Community Secure \$1MILLION

In 2022, SEAP, in collaboration with One Voice and the Mississippi NAACP, developed a Mississippi-focused ARP toolkit to enhance advocacy and ensure equitable federal fund distribution. This toolkit was crucial in connecting officials and NAACP branches statewide, notably in Jones County, where it prevented a potential Title VI Civil Rights Act violation. With One Voice's support, Supervisor Travares Comegys, the only Black supervisor on the board, alongside the local NAACP and community members, successfully secured \$1,000,000 for his district, significantly more than the initial \$100,000 proposal.

THE AMERICAN RESCUE PLAN

THE SEAP IMPACT

DASHBOARDS AND Toolkits yield 13,330 views

SEAP updated its <u>ARP Local Funds Tracker</u> to include data from all 50 states, emphasizing its dedication to community engagement and equitable spending. This updated tracker now offers detailed insights into specific projects funded by local officials, increasing transparency for communities.

SEAP EDUCATES HUNDREDS ON ARP MOVEMENT

SEAP successfully educated community members, advocates and local leaders on ARP through initiatives like its <u>ARP / What's New?</u> webinar and <u>The Hunger Cliff</u> <u>x Healthcare & Economic Security Programs</u> presentation, as well as joining state partners at ARP strategy meetings. These educational efforts have been instrumental in enhancing the understanding and engagement of ARP, focusing on its impact on healthcare, economic, and food security as it relates to the Southern context.



Emily Roberts (*Speaking*) resents at North Carolina's ARP Strategy Meeting hosted by NC Black Alliance and Local Progress and Local Progress Impact Lab.

EQUITY & VOICE

Piloting the Our Dollars, Our Dreams Campaign in New Orleans, Louisiana

In 2023, SEAP continued to foster its partnership with the Committee for a Better New Orleans (<u>CBNO</u>). SEAP's consultant, Aarti Sharma, authored a *Draft Equity Framework for New Orleans* to guide the infrastructure development process, from project identification to implementation, including procurement and labor. This collaboration targets New Orleans' specific challenges, using federal funds to address key issues like affordable housing, infrastructure development, and economic equity. This work also serves as a pilot for SEAP's Our Dollars, Our Dream campaign, which is set to launch in February of 2024.

SEAP Uplifted the Voices of 1600 Food-Insecure Families in Louisiana, South Carolina and Tennessee

SEAP conducted a survey to invite the <u>voices of food-insecure families across LA, SC, and</u> <u>TN</u> to the table regarding spending decisions. SEAP partnered with Propel to promote the survey to food-insecure families, garnering over 1,600 responses. The survey revealed that most respondents, primarily women and individuals in the 25-64 age bracket with annual household incomes below \$20,000, struggle to meet basic needs and want leaders to prioritize funding for affordable housing.

- Notably, 75% of participants reported difficulties paying for utilities.
- More than 50% faced personal debt and affordable housing challenges.
- 95% of respondents say elected officials or community leaders have yet to reach out about federal funds available to their communities.

These insights offer a compelling case for local officials in the surveyed states to leverage federal investments from the ARP, BIL and IRA to foster a more equitable recovery.

Youth Fines & Fees

Last year, SEAP conducted surveys for <u>Deep Center</u> to collect stories on the impact of youth fines and fees in Georgia. The responses helped support Deep Center's advocacy and were included in their 2023 policy report, which can be viewed <u>here</u>. SEAP was also a part of their efforts in 2021, which led to the Chatham County Juvenile Court adopting a policy to end youth supervision fees and youth fines and to discharge outstanding fees and fines.

EQUITY & VOICE

Corporate Take-over of Housing Markets

An 8-point framework for tracking the rise of large corporate landlords in single-family rentals, authored by Georgia Tech's Dr. Elora Raymond, dives into how current real estate processes can exacerbate existing inequalities. In the aftermath of the foreclosure crisis and the rise of investment in single-family rentals, there is a growing interest in the effect rental property investors might have on various outcomes for low-income tenants. Many investors viewed the COVID-19 economic crisis as another opportunity to accelerate investments in purchases of residential housing stock, including single-family houses, apartment buildings, long-stay motels and mobile home parks.

A few of the key takeaways from this paper include:

- Large corporate firms are buying up larger shares of neighborhoods—especially in majority Black neighborhoods.
- The racial wealth gap will widen if Black households are crowded out of the market.
- Policymakers must seriously consider tenant protection in response to the increasingly consolidated rental markets operated by extremely powerful firms.



August 2023, Sarah Beth Gehl (*far left/end*) shared insight on the impact of private equity firms on local housing markets, discussing homeownership, consumer protections, and the racial wealth gap with Georgia advocates at a roundtable event hosted by the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau.

EQUITY & VOICE

THE SEAP IMPACT

NOLA EQUITY FRAMEWORK Workshop Draws 16 city Staffers The workshop, led by the Committee for a Better New Orleans (CBNO) and Workplace Justice Project (WJP), featured diverse participants from within and outside City Hall, creating a comprehensive platform for discussion and planning regarding federal dollars. Attendees, which included 16 city staff members, were equipped with a draft Equity Framework. It was developed in collaboration with the Building Our Future Coalition, convened by the CBNO and the WJP. SEAP provided research support for the Framework, which delved into specifics of how the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) could catalyze equitable development throughout the City.

SEAP'S Relentless Advocacy Helps Bring Huge Win For Black Farmers

A game-changing win for transparency and fair lending for Black farmers. In 2019, SEAP launched a series of listening sessions with Black farmers in Georgia, which grew to a virtual convening attended by more than 700 Black farmers from around the region and beyond. Fast forward to 2022, when the federal government called for comments on whether race and ethnicity data should be required from lenders on small business loans. A SEAP partner reached out for help. Could we bring Black farmers to the table and ensure their voices were heard...and guickly !? SEAP coordinated 30 signers (farmers, food justice organizations, conservation groups, community-based organizations, and mission-driven lenders) in submitting comments, which CFPB staff referenced throughout deliberations. The final rule released in March 2023 includes agricultural loans for the first time and will capture the experiences of Black farmers for a systemic view of lending inequities!

CLIMATE

Defining Disadvantage for Justice 40

In her <u>Defining Disadvantage for Justice 40</u> report, Georgia Tech's Dr. Allison Bridges provides an overview of approaches to developing definitions that align with these programs' application requirements. The IRA and BIL fund numerous programs for communities facing disproportionate health, environmental, and economic burdens. These programs for disadvantaged communities are available across sectors, including clean energy and transit, climate change, affordable housing, environmental remediation, clean water, and workforce development.

As many IRA and BIL funding opportunities are Justice40-covered programs, 40% of the benefits must flow to disadvantaged communities. To prepare applications for these programs, eligible non-profit organizations and local governments are encouraged to develop criteria for identifying disadvantaged or overburdened communities. As no standardized definition of a disadvantaged community exists, federal agencies are responsible for developing their approach to identifying target communities and assessing program success. This report acts as a comprehensive guide for leaders.

SEAP HIRES FEDERAL RESOURCES COORDINATOR & HOSTS ECONOMIC RECOVERY CORPS FELLOW

In October 2023, SEAP hired a Federal Resource Coordinator to lead its focus on the IRA and other federal dollars. Liza Crichton of Memphis, Tennessee, joined the SEAP team to work directly with city leaders and organizations as they dive into federal funding decision-making and grant applications. Liza has already been incredibly instrumental in creating the programmatic framework for Our Dollars, Our Dreams, which included detailing services SEAP would provide to communities and specific federal funding opportunities to target. Liza will work alongside SEAP's Economic Recovery Corps (ERC) Fellow, Fenika Miller, to accomplish this work.

The ERC is a collaborative initiative designed to accelerate recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic in distressed communities and regions throughout the U.S. by connecting organizations with the talent and capacity needed to advance new ways of doing economic development. The ERC Program matched 65 Host sites nationwide with a dedicated Fellow, fully funded for 2.5 years, who will act as a field catalyst to build, strengthen, and coordinate relationships and local efforts alongside their host community.

CLIMATE



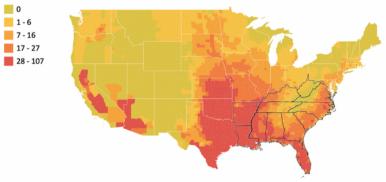
Genny Castillo (*far right*) speaks on the closing plenary panel at the Communities First Fund Region 4 Convening in Durham, NC.

CONTINUING EFFORTS 2024

SEAP, in collaboration with the National Conference on Citizenship and Fair Count, has evolved its Pandemic to Prosperity series into Pathways to Prosperity, shifting its focus towards a dedicated examination of climate issues. Since 2020, these partnerships have aimed to illuminate the pathways to recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. Now, they pivot to address the urgent and complex challenge of climate change, emphasizing resilience and equity. Pathways to Prosperity aims to provide a data-driven, evidence-based foundation to guide strategic actions and investments in response to the climate crisis.

The majority of Southerners experienced 15+ extreme heat days in 2021.

Number of extreme heat days (100°F Heat Index) by county May - September 2021



Source: CDC/NASA. Notes: Data not available for Hawaii or Alaska.

P2P Climate January 2024 Report

HEALTH

In December 2023, SEAP, in partnership with the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) and the Georgia Legal Services Program, hosted a critical teletown hall conducted in Spanish to address the pressing issue of Medicaid Unwinding in Georgia, focusing particularly on its impact on children's coverage. This event, drawing nearly 4,700 participants, highlighted Georgia's alarming rank as the third-worst state for disenrolling children from Medicaid, as reported by CMS. SEAP's Genny Castillo facilitated the event with the discussion centered on urgent community concerns such as delayed Medicaid approvals, denials of coverage for sick children, and questions regarding the duration of Medicaid coverage for children. These issues underscore the acute need for clear information, streamlined processes, and robust support systems to navigate the complexities of Medicaid.

- Delayed Medicaid Approval: A concerned participant shared, "My baby has been sick for four months waiting for Medicaid after I applied. What can I do so [the baby] can receive Medicaid as fast as possible?"
- Denial of Medicaid for a Sick Child: Another participant inquired, "I have applied for Medicaid, but my son was denied. He is now sick, and my income is low. Can I apply again for my son?"
- **Duration of Child Medicaid Coverage:** Listeners sought clarification on the duration a child can be covered under Medicaid, reflecting the community's need for comprehensive information.

CONTINUING EFFORTS 2024

In the first quarter of 2024, SEAP is extending its Medicaid Unwinding efforts to Florida, North Carolina, and Mississippi, building on the momentum of its successful initiatives in Georgia. Recognizing the critical need for targeted outreach and education on Medicaid complexities, especially in light of the challenges faced by children and vulnerable families, SEAP plans to leverage its partnerships to address pressing healthcare coverage issues. This expansion reflects SEAP's commitment to ensuring that families across the Southern region have the information and support they need to navigate Medicaid Unwinding and secure essential healthcare coverage.

SEAP ON THE GO

Genny Castillo (right) and Emily Roberts (left) traveled to Natchez, MS, at the invitation of local leader Joseph A.C. Smith (center). While in Natchez, SEAP learned about incredible community engagement work in this historic town.

Genny Castillo (2nd from right) spoke on a public-policy-focused panel at The LBJ School of Public Affairs at The University of Texas at Austin PPIA Public Service Weekend.

In July 2023, Emily Roberts (center) toured the main campus and offices of SEAP's partner, The Industrial Commons.

In June 2023, SEAP joined leaders nationwide at EconCon2023 in Washington, DC. SEAP staff members (left to right): Emily Roberts, Genny Castillo, and Dede Dunham.





TEXASLBJ School







ADDITIONAL RELEASES & EFFORTS

- The Hunger Cliff x Healthcare & Economic Security Programs
- Building Thriving Communities
- <u>Census Bureau's The Opportunity Project Summit</u>
- American Rescue Plan: What's New?
- SEAP Host Medicaid Unwinding Teletown Hall in Spanish
- SEAP Releases Updated American Rescue Plan Local Funds Tracker
- ARP Activist Guide: Revised Edition
- ARP Toolkit: ARP in Action Success Stories
- <u>ARP Toolkit: ARP in Action for the Disability Community</u>
- SEAP, New Disabled South ARP Funds Impacting Disability Community.
- Testimonial: One Voice Wins Federal Funds for Community
- Survey Reveals Food Security as an Emerging Top Challenge in LA, SC & TN
- <u>There's still time to press for equitable ARP spending</u>
- <u>American Rescue Plan Second Anniversary Campaign</u>
- <u>A revitalized dashboard for tracking ARPA funding</u>
- Lessons from SEAP: Advancing equity through federal funding implementation
- Broadening kids' opportunities across the American South: SEAP
- Our View: The pandemic's impact on the state, in numbers
- Public Dollars for Public Good
- <u>Corporate landlords expand home affordability inequity</u>
- Saturday Town Hall event aims to 'help Natchez be her best'
- <u>A Foundation's Bid to Build Access and Change Narratives Around Gov. Spending</u>
- Pandemic to Prosperity: South
- Brief: Federal Funding Implementation
- <u>Comments to the Interagency Community Investment Committee</u>
- <u>SEAP Updated ARP Local Funds Tracker</u>
- <u>Case Studies: Organizing for Federal Funds</u>
- Housing Framework
- American Rescue Plan ARP and Equity Initiatives
- How Communities Prioritize Equity, Transparency, and Good Jobs
- <u>ARP Local Funds Tracker Updates</u>
- <u>Memo: Equity Datasets</u>
- <u>Comments: OMB Race and Ethnicity Standards Sign-On</u>
- <u>Federal Technical Assistance Programs Spreadsheet</u>
- Housing Markets & Private Equity Firms
- Texas Lyndon B. Johnson Public Policy Panel
- Code for America Presentation
- Democracy Alliance Presentation



SOUTHSTRONG POLICY ENTREPRENEUR PROGRAM

In 2020, SEAP created the SouthStrong network to unify community leaders across the South in our collective efforts to pursue narrative change, advocacy, and an equitable recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2024, SEAP is thrilled to reengage the SouthStrong network through our SouthStrong Policy Entrepreneur Program. We are preparing an engaging, insightful, year-long curriculum for SouthStrong Policy Entrepreneur Program members. Accepted organizations will receive a stipend for completing the entire curriculum.



In February 2024, SEAP is set to launch the Our Dollars, Our Dream campaign, a strategic initiative aimed at empowering Southern communities to take ownership of public dollars. This program is designed to provide practical support, including research on equity-focused strategies, assistance securing funds, and a platform for sharing best practices among partners. The goal is to ensure equitable access to public funds, enabling communities to build a sustainable and prosperous future.

Community Change Grants

SEAP also seeks to connect with Southern-based 501c3s and local governments interested in applying for the EPA Community Change Grant, which promotes incorporating climatefriendly solutions to solve tough societal problems and increase community participation in government. SEAP will provide pro bono services that match Southern leaders with specialists who offer a wide range of technical assistance, including grant writing, data and research, capacity building, and long-term strategic and organizational planning.

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