Participation Levels of African Americans in the Profession of Blindness Services: Views of Service Providers

Executive Summary

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This summary contains highlights from a longer and more detailed report, *Participation levels of African Americans in the profession of blindness services: Views of service providers* (Monograph) (Giesen, Gooding, McBroom, Hicks, Ewing, Maxson, & Armstrong, 1995). Copies of that report are available from the Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Blindness and Low Vision.

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INTRODUCTION

African Americans and other members of minority groups are substantially under-represented in the professional and occupational ranks of rehabilitation service providers for persons who are blind or visually impaired. At the same time, they are proportionally represented or over-represented as clients and consumers of rehabilitation services for persons with blindness. In addition, African Americans suffer a greater incidence of disability and other conditions which can lead to blindness and visual impairments. It might be expected that this imbalanced situation would be pronounced in the Southeastern United States because of the higher percentage of African Americans in the region.

It is assumed that increased membership by African Americans and other minorities in the profession of services to persons who are blind is desirable, is appropriate for the field, and would improve service delivery. Once the reasons for low participation of African Americans are identified, directions for programs and activities could be established to improve the existing imbalanced situation.

Prevalence of Blindness Among African Americans

It is estimated that African Americans, Asian Americans, and Native Americans make up 17% of the U.S. population, with African Americans comprising 13% (or 12% African American, when Hispanics are excluded) (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1995). At first glance, these numbers may appear small. However, researchers have shown that the prevalence of visual impairments among these groups is much higher than among the White majority (Kirchner, 1985; Kirchner & Peterson, 1981). One estimate indicates there are approximately 3 million persons who are visually impaired (Tielsch, Sommer, Witt, Katz, & Royall, 1990). Of these, ethnic minorities account for one third of the visually impaired population (National Center for Health Statistics, 1977). African Americans report blindness or visual impairments three times more often than Whites (Kahn & Moorehead, 1973; Kirchner, 1985; National Center for Health Statistics, 1977; National Center for Health Statistics and National Center for Health Service Research, 1977; Walker, Akpati, Roberts, Palmer, & Newson, 1986).

Examining only members of the labor force, 41% of Blacks with disabilities earn below poverty incomes (Bowe, 1992). Blacks in the labor force have less disposable income, are less likely to be covered by health care plans, and tend to avoid costly medical care. As a result, they are less likely to seek medical care for treatable conditions (Bowe, 1992; Kirchner, 1985).

Clients of Blindness Vocational Rehabilitation

According to prevalence and vocational rehabilitation statistics, people who need blindness services disproportionately come from minority groups. Blacks

represent a higher percentage of blind vocational rehabilitation clients (21%) than their proportion in the general population (11%). For Whites, the comparison is 83% in the general population and 66% in blindness vocational rehabilitation (Kirchner & Peterson, 1981).

Data from Prevent Blindness America (1994) indicate that (a) there is a substantially higher proportion of African Americans in Alabama and Mississippi than the national average; (b) the same trend is true for Americans age 40 and older, although the proportion for Blacks is somewhat reduced; (c) the percentage of persons age 40 and over who are blind or visually impaired is greater for Blacks than for Whites and Others; and (d) the rate of blindness and visual impairment is higher in Alabama and Mississippi for Blacks than the national rate, although this is not true for Whites and Others combined.

Questions have been advanced about the rehabilitation system perpetuating inequalities among the client subgroups who receive services. Based on national data from the vocational rehabilitation system for persons with general disabilities, Kirchner and Peterson (1981) concluded that (a) those in need of vocational rehabilitation services are proportionately more likely to come from ethnic minority groups, (b) minority clients require a different combination of services, and (c) minority clients are harder to place in competitive employment. Based on summary outcome data, including rates of acceptance, successful closures, paid closures, and employment in the year after closure, Kirchner and Peterson tentatively concluded that the vocational rehabilitation system works in the direction of reducing inequalities among client subgroups, but with restricted long-term success. Other investigators disagreed.

Atkins and Wright (1980) contended that Blacks are less likely to be accepted for vocational rehabilitation services than Whites. Three most common reasons given by counselors for nonacceptance of Blacks with disabilities were failure to cooperate, lack of vocational handicap, and lack of disabling condition (Atkins, 1993; Danek & Lawrence, 1982). When Blacks were eligible for services, they were less likely to be rehabilitated, less likely to receive college training, and more likely to receive less costly vocational rehabilitation services. Danek and Lawrence (1982) reported that White clients were accepted in a shorter time period than Black clients. Black clients tended to be supported by public and private assistance at referral and White clients, by family or friends. Black and White clients were about the same age, yet White clients obtained more years of education. At case closure, more Whites were employed in professional, technical, managerial, clerical, and sales positions; more Blacks were employed in service industries and as homemakers. Black counselors served proportionately more Black clients than did White counselors.

In a survey of consumers of blindness services, respondents indicated that a close personal relationship between a service provider and client was extremely important (Uslan, Hill, & Peck, 1989). This suggests that efforts to recruit specialists from racial and ethnic minorities is necessary to provide more effective

programs that address cultural diversities, including language differences. Although general attempts have been made to reach specific minority groups and to improve services offered to those groups (Ruiz, 1983), significant improvements have not occurred. Minority groups are still not receiving services according to their needs, as evidenced in part by their continued high incidence of visual impairments.

METHOD

This study investigated what service delivery professionals in Alabama and Mississippi believe are the factors that account for the low levels of participation of African Americans in the profession of service delivery to persons who are blind. Some of the possible reasons investigated included low salaries; lack of available jobs in the field; unawareness of the blindness profession among students, teachers, and counselors; lack of training and education programs in rehabilitation service delivery; low accessibility of programs to Black students; and negative views and attitudes toward social service occupations by Black students and others.

Information was gathered from rehabilitation service delivery professionals and administrators in state agencies serving persons who are blind in Alabama and Mississippi. These two states were selected *not* because the phenomenon of low level of participation was expected to be severe, but because of high rates of incidence of blindness (Mississippi has the highest rate in the nation); relatively high percentage of African Americans; traditional representation of the Deep South; and close proximity to the Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Blindness and Low Vision and Alabama A&M University.

A survey instrument was developed which contained 43 core questions and additional questions appropriate for each personnel group (administrators, secretaries, professionals). In addition, open-ended, in-depth interviews were conducted with all 21 Black vocational rehabilitation employees in both states. All surveys contained quantitative and qualitative questions designed to elicit information about the factors and barriers responsible for the low participation by African Americans in the profession of services to persons who are blind. Additional information is contained in the longer report by Giesen, Gooding, McBroom, Hicks, Ewing, Maxson, & Armstrong (1995).
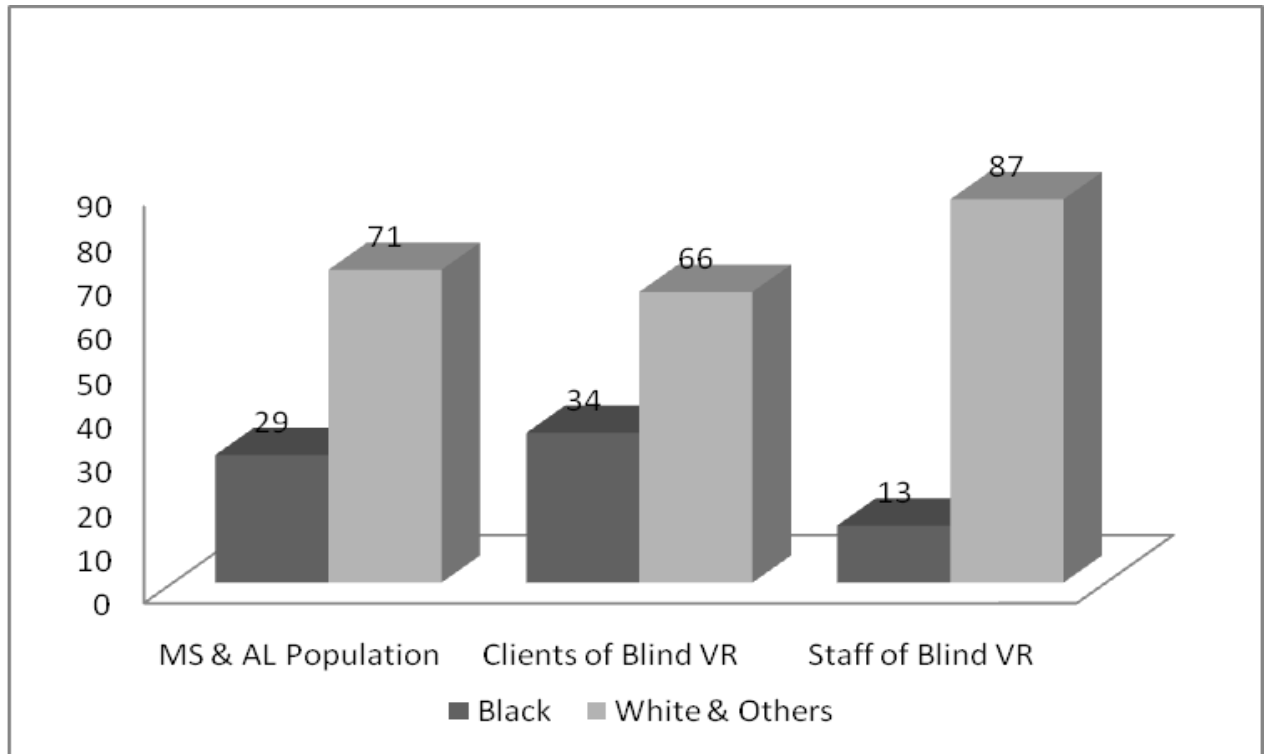
RESULTS

Agency Data Form

On the average, 1,948 persons per state with visual impairments were served annually in both Alabama and Mississippi. Of this group, 34% were African American; the remainder were White or members of another minority classification

(other minorities equaled less than one half of 1%).

A total of 116 administrative and professional service delivery employees in state vocational rehabilitation agencies served clients who are blind in Alabama and Mississippi. This total does not include support staff who were included in the attitudinal survey. There were 15 White and 2 Black administrators, and 86 White and 13 Black service delivery professionals. Among administrators, 12% were African American. Among service delivery professionals, 13% were African American. The combined staff averaged 13% African American. The average number of vacancies per year for the two states was 3.0 positions. These staff vacancies could have occurred in either administrative or professional service delivery ranks.

A greater proportion of African Americans were clients rather than employees in blindness services. *Approximately 1 in 3 clients were African American, while about 1 in 8 employees were African American. Thus, the proportion of African American clients was about 2 1/2 times greater than the proportion of African Americans who were blindness service employees. Blacks were under-represented as service providers compared to their representation as service recipients* (Figure 1).

African Americans In State, As Clients, and As Providers: Alabama and Mississippi

Survey Instrument

Survey results from 126 respondents, including administrators, service delivery professionals, and secretaries (86% response rate) were analyzed. In general, results from *t*-test and ANOVA analyses indicated minimal attitudinal differences between personnel categories and many differences by race.

Administrator and Support Staff Questions

Administrators and support staff were asked 11 questions which were not asked of the professional staff. Black administrators tended to disagree that specific efforts had been made or an active plan existed for recruiting Black professionals into the organization. In contrast, White administrators agreed on these items; White administrators perceived the status quo as more positive, fair, and progressive than did Black administrators.

Black and White administrators agreed that entry pay level was *not* a factor in attracting qualified Black employees. However, additional data from survey comments and interviews indicated that entry pay level *was* a factor in recruiting qualified employees, regardless of race.

Black administrators agreed that lack of Black administrators is detrimental to recruiting qualified Black employees; White administrators disagreed. This suggests that as more Blacks enter the field and advance, recruiting Black employees should become less difficult.

Both Black and White administrators agreed that the personnel system procedures in the two state agencies do not pose barriers to targeted recruitment of Black employees. However, Black administrators felt strongly that there were changes that could be made that would enhance recruitment of Blacks; White administrators mostly disagreed.

Black and White administrators did not believe that more Black professionals would enhance the quality of service delivery. However, Black administrators believed that more Black professional employees would enhance the quality of services to Black clients.

Based on this portion of the survey, the following suggestions can be made:

1. With respect to recruiting, more specific efforts and an active plan may increase the level of participation of Blacks in blindness services.
2. Although better entry pay levels may increase the attractiveness of employment in the field, it would not be expected to increase participation more for Black than for White employees.
3. Administrators do not view the current personnel system as a problem or barrier, but there is indication that changes could be made to enhance recruitment of Black professionals.

4. There is an expectation that more Black professionals will enhance the quality of service delivery to Black clients.

Core Questions

The factor analysis interpretation indicated that the 43 survey items measured five factors or themes: (a) Endorsement of efforts to increase participation of Blacks, (b) Differences in attractiveness of blindness services profession, (c) Factors affecting Black participation in the profession of blindness services, (d) Future prospects for Black participation in the profession of blindness services, and (e) Differences in perceptions of advantages and participation in blindness services as part of society.

Theme 1: Endorsement of Efforts to Increase Participation of Blacks. Both Black and White respondents strongly agreed that the following factors will increase awareness of career opportunities: provide more information at high school and college career days, develop more publicity, target Blacks for recruitment efforts, and develop degree and training programs at historically Black colleges and universities. Respondents also agreed that blindness services careers will become more attractive to Blacks as more Blacks work in the field. Neither Black nor White respondents believed that there were more college training opportunities for Blacks than for Whites.

Theme 2: Differences in Attractiveness of Blindness Services Profession. Blacks tended to agree more than Whites that a blindness career was more popular, attractive, and more sought after by Whites; Whites more often learned about and had advisors or mentors in the blindness field. In addition, Blacks agreed while Whites disagreed that economic factors prevented Blacks more than Whites from moving to take jobs in blindness services.

Both Blacks and Whites disagreed that Blacks do not desire blindness services careers, Blacks do not have enough training for existing jobs in blindness, Whites are more likely than Blacks to posses the social skills for blindness services, the blindness field is less attractive to Blacks because of the field's low status, family and community ties prevent Blacks from moving to new jobs, and a history of economic hardship affects Blacks' choices of jobs.

Theme 3: Factors Affecting Black Participation in the Profession of Blindness Services. Blacks agreed more than Whites that job stability and lack of new jobs decreased career participation by Blacks and increased financial assistance for academic training would increase Black participation.

Theme 4: Future Prospects for Black Participation in the Profession of Blindness Services. Whites agreed more than Blacks that Blacks would get their share of new employment opportunities generated by new jobs, retirement, or advancement; blindness service professionals wanted to increase Black participation and Black opportunities; there was more available financial assistance for training for Blacks; and "government policies" had increased Black

participation.

Theme 5: Differences in Perceptions of Advantages and Participation in Blindness Services as Part of Society. Blacks agreed more strongly than Whites that Blacks were discouraged from participation in the field of blindness rehabilitation by discrimination in past hiring; lower likelihood of hearing about and getting jobs; lower pay for the same training or experience; less advantaged when equally qualified; discouragement by the lower likelihood of advancement; certification and accreditation requirements; under-identification in recruiting practices; and less likelihood of receiving career guidance information about blindness services. Both Black and White respondents disagreed that low salaries were more of a barrier for Blacks, better salaries would increase the attractiveness of blindness profession jobs more for Blacks, Blacks were more likely to stay in contact with friends and acquaintances in the blindness field, and history and culture motivated Blacks to work in a disability field such as blindness. It was generally observed that Black respondents perceived Whites as having advantages; White respondents perceived Whites and Blacks as having similar advantages.

Biographic and Demographic Characteristics

Age. Survey respondents' average age was 43 years. The average age of Whites was 44 years and Blacks was 39 years.

Gender and race. Sixty-one percent of the respondents were female (74 respondents) and 39% were male (48 respondents). Eighty-three percent identified themselves as White and only 16%, as Black. Three quarters of the female respondents were White, however, practically all of the males were White.

Marital status. Most respondents were married (76%). Ten percent had never married, 9% were divorced, 3% were widowed, and 2% were legally separated.

Professional status. Fifteen percent (18 respondents) classified themselves as administrators; 25% (30 respondents) as secretaries; and 61% (74 respondents) as other professionals (rehabilitation counselors, instructional staff, BEP representatives). Seventy-eight percent of the administrators were male and 88% were White. All 30 secretaries were female and 72% were White. Professionals were about equally divided between males and females, but were much more heavily represented by Whites.

Length of employment. For this and all remaining analyses, secretaries were excluded from the report. The average length of employment in the blindness system was 11.5 years. White and Black respondents appeared to have worked for equal numbers of years, until the data outliers from two Black respondents were excluded from the sample. Analysis then showed that Blacks have been employed for only 8.6 years.

Educational achievement. Respondents were asked three questions about education: their own achievement, that of either one of their parents, and that of their spouse. All but 2 people had some college education; the most frequent

response was a master's degree (59%). The most frequent response for parents was high school graduate (34%). Respondents who were ever married were asked about the highest level of education for their spouse; the most frequent response was master's degree (26%).

 Professional organizations. Most of the administrators and professional service delivery personnel belonged to the Association for Education and Rehabilitation of the Blind and Visually Impaired (AER) (80%). Over one third (36%) belonged to the National Rehabilitation Association and 11% belonged to other professional organizations. Only 16% of the respondents had not joined any professional organization, while 35% held memberships in multiple organizations.

 Professional certification. Again, for administrators and professionals only, the majority of respondents did not report any certification (60%). Nine percent of the respondents were Certified Rehabilitation Counselors, 21% were certified by AER, and 16%, by other organizations. Seven percent held multiple certifications.

Open-Ended Questions

 All respondents were ask what might be done to make careers in blindness services more attractive to Blacks. Respondents suggested increasing publicity and awareness (job fairs or careers days at schools and colleges, shared information about opportunities in the blindness field, better use of media); raising salaries and increasing benefits; increasing educational and training opportunities, and financial assistance; and using special strategies to target Blacks (targeted recruitment, Black mentors and role models).

 Respondents were asked to specify actions or activities that would increase awareness among Blacks about career opportunities in blindness services. They suggested strategic dissemination (job fairs, high school or college career days, historically Black institutions, career guidance counselors, teachers), training programs, and the provision of more information on blindness and general disabilities.

 Respondents believed that Black participation in blindness services training programs could be increased by creating better publicity about careers in blindness services and training programs (Black role models or Black professionals conducting programs about blindness careers); increasing funding for scholarships or loan programs for minority students; and developing more or different training programs, particularly at Black colleges.

 To recruit and hire more Blacks in blindness services, respondents suggested hiring practices be changed by increasing the pool of qualified Black applicants (education, active and targeted recruitment, Black role models) and eliminating discrimination.

 Respondents believed that Blacks can have real opportunities for new jobs in blindness services by preparing for work through education and qualifications,

increasing awareness among Blacks, increasing motivation, using networks and mentors, and eliminating discrimination. Difficulties associated with moving or relocation for Blacks in taking jobs in blindness services could be overcome by offering financial assistance and demonstrating flexibility.

Interviews of Black Professionals

All Black professionals serving persons with visual impairments from Alabama and Mississippi participated in one-on-one interviews. A follow-up interview was also conducted to ask additional questions that arose during the study. Several themes emerged from these interviews, many of which were consistent with written comments on the survey.

1. Low level participation by Blacks in blindness services careers is not due to lack of interest or perceived low prestige, but rather due to a lack of awareness among Blacks or focus on recruiting Blacks.

2. The lack of awareness is mainly due to a lack of focus on disability and rehabilitation-related careers (including blindness) at educational institutions attended by Blacks.

3. Whites are more likely than Blacks to seek jobs in blindness services because Whites are more likely to learn about jobs through informal networks ("contacts"), and know more about opportunities and options (awareness) due to their traditional involvement with the field.

4. Barriers to Blacks in blindness services are informal networks ("old boy" system) that exclude Blacks, and a tendency for Blacks to seek academic preparation in areas where they are already employed.

5. Certification and accreditation standards are not impediments to Blacks in blindness services.

6. Historically Black institutions are important for increasing awareness of careers in blindness services, providing increased educational and training opportunities in the field, and providing financial incentives.

7. Black employment can be increased through targeted recruitment and a focus on Black institutions.

8. Discriminatory practices are declining, but still exist to a certain extent. Blacks are paid less. Agencies have increased Black participation, at least to minimal levels. Opportunities for upward mobility have improved, but still favor Whites.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

From Agency Data

Data from the state agencies serving persons who are blind indicate that during the reporting period, 34% of blindness rehabilitation clients were Black and 66% were White or Other. The two state agency staffs were 13% Black and 87% White. These data indicate that the proportion of African American clients is about 10% higher than their proportion in the population. The proportion of African American working in blindness services is about 16% less than their proportion in the Alabama and Mississippi populations. Less than 3 in 10 persons in the Alabama and Mississippi populations are Black. Among clients of state vocational rehabilitation agencies serving persons who are blind, about 3.4 in 10 are Black. Among service providers, 1.3 in 10 are Black. *In Alabama and Mississippi, African Americans are over-represented as clients and under-represented as professional providers in vocational rehabilitation services for persons who are blind.*

From Administrators' Ratings

Results from the administrators' questions allow several conclusions to be drawn: (a) more specific recruiting efforts and active plans may increase the level of participation of Blacks in blindness services; (b) better entry pay levels may increase the general attractiveness of employment in the field, but not more so for Blacks than for Whites; (c) the current personnel system is not a problem or barrier, but changes might enhance recruitment of Black professionals; and (d) more Black professionals will enhance the quality of service delivery to Black clients.

Data indicate that administrators make specific efforts to attract Black professionals into the field of services to persons who are blind. Administrators make personal contacts, participate in job fairs and career days, and recommend appropriate education and training opportunities to Black potential employees. Administrators (88% were White) do not see barriers to the recruitment of Black employees into their organizations.

From Survey Ratings

Increasing Black participation in blindness services can be achieved by increasing information, dissemination, and publicity; and developing more training programs, particularly at historically Black institutions. Substantial Black/White differences exist in the perceptions of attractiveness of working in blindness services. In general, Whites are viewed as having advantages in hearing about, seeking, being prepared for, getting, holding, and advancing in blindness services jobs. In general, Whites are more optimistic than Blacks about current and future employment prospects.

There are differences in perceptions about the impact of job stability and lack of new jobs on the low level of career participation by Blacks, and the impact of increased financial assistance for training on Black participation. There are differences in perceptions regarding Blacks getting their fair share of new jobs and

the impact of "government policies" on participation by Blacks. Blacks are perceived as having been at a disadvantage "across the board" in employment in blindness services, including past discrimination; less awareness; and less opportunity for training, employment, and advancement.

General Conclusions

Several things can be done to make careers in blindness services more visible and attractive to Blacks.

*__Increase publicity and awareness__: develop better publicity strategies (job fairs, career days), implement direct contacts with career counselors, develop special publications and brochures, make better use of available media (target African Americans and historically Black institutions, use Blacks as mentors and role models), and provide more information about blindness and general disabilities.
*__Increase salaries and benefits__: offer better pay, benefits, and advancement opportunities.
*__Increase training programs__: provide more educational and training opportunities, and financial assistance to participants.

Participation of Blacks in training programs can be increased by similar strategies:

*__Improve publicity about careers and training programs in blindness services.__
*__Increase scholarships and loan programs for minority students.__
*__Develop more or different training programs__: target historically Black institutions.

Also suggested were the following:

*__Use strategies to increase Black applicants__: target the recruitment and use of Black role models.
*__Make commitment to eliminate discrimination.__
*__Advocate preparedness__: increase awareness, motivation, networking, and mentors.
*__Encourage employer flexibility__: meet job transition needs (interviews, moves).

Final Conclusions

As more Blacks become employed in blindness services, they will become part of the informal social network in this field. This will increase awareness and information about jobs for other Blacks. Also, with more Blacks in the field, the attractiveness of the field should increase since potential Black employees will identify with other Black professionals acting as role models and mentors.

The scope of vocational rehabilitation of persons who are blind or visually

impaired falls short of the potential population who may benefit from services. An estimated 6,613,803 persons reside in Alabama and Mississippi. African Americans comprise 29% or 1,937,844 persons, of whom 6% are visually impaired or legally blind (Prevent Blindness America, 1994). Six percent equals 118,668 African Americans who are visually impaired or blind. Yet the yearly average served by blindness vocational rehabilitation agencies in all ethnic groups in both states is only about 4,000 persons. Clearly, the potential population far exceeds the number served. There is room for growth in numbers served and efforts to provide outreach to African Americans. Greater levels of professional participation by African Americans in blindness services bodes well toward reaching these groups. The ability of agencies to reach unserved African Americans who are blind or visually impaired can be dramatically improved.

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