

18th Annual Community Empowerment Through Black Men Healing Conference



June 25th & 26th, 2026

St. Paul College 235 Marshall Ave, St. Paul, MN 55102

Opening and Guests



Conference MC, Benny Roberts, Executive Director of Hallie Q Brown Community Center, is an Executive Director dedicated to building strong relationships. He has a proven track record of initiating cultural changes and achieving organizational goals. Confident and skilled in public speaking, he is a creative and effective influencer with a deep passion for connecting with people and shaping organizational culture.

In addition to his professional accomplishments, Mr. Roberts is also an accomplished artist. Growing up in the Twin Cities, he drew inspiration from a range of artistic influences, including visual art, theater, and music. He loves the creative process, which has allowed him to produce over 200 pieces of digital art, create more than 200 songs, develop a nationally award-winning public service announcement for the state of Minnesota, and design apparel and footwear. Check out his art at www.brobertscreates.com

Mr. Roberts embraces the journey of growth, healing, and rediscovery, and has a genuine interest in learning about people and their cultures. He deeply values his family, stating, "I love my beautiful wife and adore my daughter; I prioritize family and loved ones above all else." (www.hallieqbrown.org)



Dr. Raj is an associate professor at Metropolitan State University and has a background in criminology. He has overcome challenges such as alcoholism and sexual abuse. With over 20 years of experience in community activism as a researcher and educator, he focuses on youth resilience and the needs of men in prison. Dr. Raj trains school staff, probation agents, community members, and justice personnel on restorative practices, trauma, healing, and value-centered leadership.



Commissioner Garrison McMurtrey of District 3 is the first Black man elected to a county board in the state of Minnesota. Before being elected, McMurtrey served as the district director for the office of U.S. Congresswoman Angie Craig. Before joining the Congresswoman's office, he worked on the public affairs team at Target Corporation. He plans to prioritize creating more deeply affordable housing, investing in economic development, and ensuring county services are responsive to the needs of residents.

Ramsey County Commissioner Garrison McMurtrey is the first Black man elected to a county board in the state of Minnesota. Originally from Mississippi, McMurtrey moved to Minnesota to pursue a career in public policy and community engagement.

Before being elected, McMurtrey served as the district director for the office of U.S. Congresswoman Angie Craig. Before joining the Congresswoman's office, he worked on the public affairs team at Target Corporation. He was previously an outreach director for U.S. Senator Amy Klobuchar, where he led community engagement efforts in areas including business, workforce development, communities of color, and consumer protection.

"If you never heal from what hurt you, you'll bleed on people that didn't cut you!" Unknown

Outside of work, McMurtrey has previously served as Chair of the St. Paul DFL and commissioner on the St. Paul Planning and Charter Commissions. He has a B.A. in political science and communication from Ripon College and a M.A. in public policy from the Hubert Humphrey School of Public Affairs. Garrison lives in St. Paul's Como Park neighborhood with his wife, Clare, and their goldendoodle, Honey. He looks forward to centering economic justice at work in the county and ensuring we are building a community for future generations. He plans to prioritize creating more deeply affordable housing, investing in economic development, and ensuring county services are responsive to the needs of residents. <https://www.ramseycounty.us/your-government/leadership/board-commissioners/garrison-mcmurtrey-district-3>



Rena Moran is the current Ramsey County Commissioner of District 4, serving a large section of Saint Paul, including parts of Union Park, Hamline-Midway, Frogtown, Summit-University, North End, Downtown, Summit Hill, Macalester-Groveland and Highland Park. She currently sits on 27 different committees. She is the current Chair of the Economic Growth and Community Investment Service Team Committee of the Whole, and Vice Chair of the Budget Committee of the Whole and Legislative Committee of the Whole.

She is a former member of the Minnesota House of Representatives and the first African American to represent Saint Paul. She served six terms before retiring to run for Ramsey County Commissioner in 2022. Rena served as Chair of the Ways and Means and Health and Human Services Policy Committees in the Minnesota House of Representatives.

As a legislator, she focused on protecting children in the child welfare system, lead on Early Childhood Education funding, reducing disparities, fighting for affordable housing, economic opportunity for all, and women's rights. She continues this focus as Ramsey County Commissioner and doing county work through a race equity lens.

She formerly served as House Deputy Minority Leader, Chair of the People of Color and Indigenous Caucus and the United Black Legislative Caucus. She holds a B.S. in Early Childhood Education from Southern Illinois University and is the former Director of Prevention Initiatives and Parent Leadership at Prevent Child Abuse MN (dba) Minnesota Communities Caring for Children. Commissioner Moran is a graduate of the Bush Foundation Fellowship, Humphrey Policy Fellowship, and Henry Toll Fellowship.

On a national level, Moran served as Executive Secretary of the National Black Caucus of State Legislators (NBCSL), Midwest Region Coordinator for the National Organization of Black Elected Legislative Women (NOBEL). She is currently the Parliamentarian of the National Foundation for Women Legislators (NFWL). She is a proud mother of seven children and thirteen grandchildren.



Jamela Pettiford began singing at the tender age of 4. Raised in the infamous Rondo community, Saint Paul, Minnesota. Born into a historic musical lineage, including Oscar Pettiford, a jazz Icon. Pettiford's style of music was influenced by gospel greats such as Mahalia Jackson, the Winans, and the Clark Sisters- traditional Black church infused with deep-rooted soul.

Jamela Pettiford learned at a young age from some of Minnesota's best musicians and singers while attending community-based youth choirs and was cast in the first Mall of America commercial in 1992. Throughout the years, Pettiford has been featured in many bands and music groups, joining the Big John Dickerson blues band in 2004, and was inducted into the "Minnesota Blues Society" Hall of Fame in April 2007.

In partnership with community-based performing arts organizations, and has shared her gifts on the stage in many play productions with various social justice impactors; Amiri Baraka in "Wise, Why's, Y's", Dorothy Cotton & Bernice King -Youth Summit Atlanta, GA, Naomi Tutu -Youth Empowerment Summit, also in collaboration

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Dismembered and Unarmed is a collaborative album executive produced by Chaka Mkali and Resmaa Menakem. The album was created in conjunction with Menakem's book *My Grandmother's Hands*. Over the past 25-plus years, Pettiford has combined deep-rooted soul while enhancing, edifying, and encouraging the community.

Performing in song or as a psalmist, reciting poetry, or ministering a word as a facilitator, Jamela Pettiford is known for enriching the space with her mere presence and grace. The gift of interpretive song only enhances the experience. Jamela Pettiford has produced music that can be found on all platforms with various artists, including solo projects written by Jamela Pettiford, also known as GOD's Queen.

Featured Speakers

"A Son's Reckoning With Family: Trauma, Truth-Telling, and the Path Toward Community Healing"



Dr. Carl L. Young, PhD, is a trauma-informed clinical writer, therapist, and author of *A Son's Reckoning With Family*. His work blends behavioral health, cultural analysis, and narrative healing to support individuals and communities in reclaiming identity, dignity, and emotional truth. He is the founder of Increasing Life Chances 4 You (ILC4Y), a movement dedicated to communal repair, emotional literacy, and generational healing. Dr. Carl also provides school-based mental health therapy services for the Wilder Foundation's Kofi Program and private community-based therapy services through LifeStance Health.

"How is your soul, today?"



Rev. Aledria "Lee" A. Buckley is an executive leader, trauma-informed practitioner, and spiritual care provider whose work bridges systems leadership and community healing. With more than 30 years of experience advising executives across healthcare, government, corporate, nonprofit, and highly regulated environments, she specializes in organizational resilience, culture transformation, and workforce well-being. She is widely recognized for her ability to translate trauma-informed principles into practical strategies that strengthen both institutions and the people they serve.

In parallel with her executive leadership, Aledria serves as a hospital chaplain and minister, providing spiritual care in moments of crisis, grief, addiction recovery, and incarceration. Her lived experience across boardrooms and bedside ministry gives her a rare perspective on how generational trauma, suppressed grief, and culturally conditioned survival patterns impact the mind, body, and soul of communities—particularly Black men.

Her keynote, "How Is Your Soul, Today?", invites faith leaders, clinicians, policymakers, and practitioners into a deeper conversation about healing that integrates breath work, grief acknowledgment, generational trauma awareness, healthy relationship modeling, and the essential role of the faith community.

Aledria's work challenges systems to move beyond crisis response toward sustainable, culturally responsive, and spiritually grounded community restoration.

"IT'S TIME TO DEAL WITH PAIN: the mind, body, and spirit of community healing."



Sam Simmons, LADC, behavioral consultant, conference co-creator, author, and co-host of the "Voices" on KMOJ FM has over 35 years of experience as an alcohol and drug counselor and behavioral consultant, focusing on trauma-informed strategies to address addiction, violence, and trauma, mainly aiming to improve the lives of African American men and their families. He developed a culturally specific curriculum to engage men and boys in promoting healthy, nonviolent relationships. An Adverse Childhood Experience Interface

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Trainer in Minnesota, Sam has led presentations on historical trauma and partnered with various organizations to dismantle barriers to healing.

He has received numerous accolades, including the 2007 Kirby Puckett Legacy Award and the 2009 Governor's Council on Faith and Community Service Initiatives Best Practices Award. In 2014, he was honored with the Minnesota Fathers & Families Network Excellence in Fatherhood Award and the 2016 Healing the Hidden Wounds of Racial Trauma Award. In 2018, he was recognized by the city of Minneapolis recognized him as a Public Health Hero for his innovative work in the community, and the NFL honored him for his efforts to stop violence against women. In 2024, he received Minnesota's Professional of the Year Award from the National Alliance on Mental Illness of Minnesota for his exceptional work with Black men.

Sam co-hosts the "Voices" radio show on KMOJ FM, discussing issues that affect urban communities. He is well-respected nationwide for his insights on African American historical trauma and his successful Community Empowerment Through Black Men Healing Conference, noted as innovative and leading-edge. He also wrote "Just Sam: A Black Man's Journey to Healing," which explores trauma's impact on Black men and provides a pathway to healing and empowerment. Sam emphasizes, "A community is as strong as the information it's given."

behavioral consultant, co-creator of the conference, and co-host of the "Voices" radio show on KMOJ FM, will use his family story to critically examine the link between historical and/or intergenerational trauma and current challenges in the black community and its relationship to family health. He will also explore practical trauma-informed, culture-sensitive approaches that celebrate family and uplift the community.

"Fireside Chat: trauma, healing and the Church."



Carmen D. Lewis is a racial justice and community healing leader, an ordained Pastor with over two decades of service, and the author of *Loving Jesus Made Me Crazy*—a healing journey exploring recovery from church hurt and religious trauma, and reconnecting with God. A Chicago native rooted in Minneapolis, she is the founder of Black Brilliance and a nationally recognized facilitator, speaker, and advocate who creates culturally grounded healing spaces for Black and racialized communities.

Her work integrates anti-racism, restorative practices, trauma-informed care, and mindfulness to help individuals and communities build resilience, reclaim agency, and move toward collective well-being. Carmen is known for her dynamic preaching, powerful facilitation, community-centered leadership, and deep commitment to intergenerational healing, faith, and justice.

Workshops

"Healing the Whole Man: Rebuilding Strength, Restoring Community"



Angela R. Fields is the Founder and CEO of CHW Concepts LLC and a nationally recognized Executive Community Health Worker with over 30 years of leadership in public health and workforce development. She has led initiatives that advance health equity, professionalize Community Health Workers (CHWs), and expand access to care. Angela authored the Minnesota Standardized CHW Certificate Curriculum (Mental Health) and develops workforce training programs used statewide to prepare CHWs. She is recognized for building strong partnerships that strengthen the public health workforce and drive community-centered solutions for improved health outcomes.

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Alex Abraha is the Founder of Restorative Selam Strategies, where he supports organizations and communities in building trust, navigating conflict, and advancing healing-centered, restorative approaches to leadership and systems change. He brings experience across higher education, healthcare, government, and nonprofit sectors, with a strong background in facilitation, leadership development, and community empowerment. Alex is passionate about creating spaces for healing, accountability, and collective growth, with a special commitment to strengthening Black communities through wellness, equity, and transformative change.

From Survival to Soil of Safety: Neuroplasticity, Trust, and the Future of Black Community Health”



Dr. Stephen Thompson, DC, DACM, FAIHM is an integrative clinician, educator, and community health advocate with over 20 years of experience working at the intersection of trauma, neurobiology, and chronic disease. He is the founder of Stockheart Whole Health in Minneapolis and the creator of several trauma-informed community healing initiatives, including BLACC Retreats and Rooted Reclaimers.

Dr. Thompson’s work focuses on how chronic stress, racism, and survival adaptations shape the nervous system, health outcomes, and generational trajectories within Black communities. Drawing from chiropractic medicine, Traditional Chinese Medicine, functional medicine, and trauma-informed care, he translates complex neuroscience and clinical insight into practical tools for individuals, families, and communities.

He is the author of *Journey from the Edge*, which explores trauma as a neurobiological and societal architecture and introduces the concept of “soil of safety” as a foundation for lasting healing. His approach emphasizes collaboration, embodied regulation, and accessible pathways to restoring physical, mental, emotional, financial, and spiritual health.

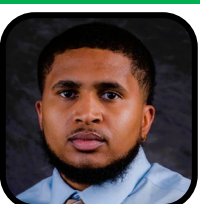
Dr. Thompson is known for bridging clinic and community, science and lived experience, and personal healing with systems-level change. His work centers on helping people move from survival toward sustainable health and collective resilience.

“Maintaining Resilience in Community Work”



Noel Nix is a pre-licensed professional clinical counselor with nearly 15 years of background in public and non-profit community work. He is in clinical practice at Vibrant Life Therapy Clinic, where he provides therapy to individuals, couples, and family clients. He has led mental health workshops for the City of Saint Paul, Ramsey County, Nexus Community Partners, and several districts of the Minnesota Judicial Branch. He also serves as Director of the Incarnation Fund at New City Church in Minneapolis, which focuses on providing access to mental health care and spiritual direction to community members of color. He holds a Bachelor of Science in Business, a Master of Urban and Regional Planning from the University of Minnesota, and a Master of Counseling Psychology from the University of St. Thomas.

“The Living Bridge: Rebuilding the Village for the Modern Brother”



Rio Jones was born and raised on the South Side of Minneapolis, in a household of five, led by the unwavering strength and resilience of a single mother. He graduated from Minnesota State University, Mankato, with a BA while on a full-academic scholarship. Currently, Mr. Jones is a graduate student at Bethel University in their Master of Social Work program. In addition to his academic pursuits Mr. Jones provides mentorship to youth, serves as a basketball coach, and volunteers with different local organizations.

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Mr. Jones currently serves as the Community Outreach and Support Coordinator for Abdur Razzaq Counseling & Social Architecture. His work is vital to the organizations mission and support of community needs. Mr. Jones leads this work with enthusiasm, compassion, and grounding in community values and Afikan Black Psychological frameworks.

“Your Skin Matters: The Mind, Body, and Soul Connection of Skin, Stress, and Community”



Alva McMillan, M.Ed., B.S., APLE, is the Founder and Chief Skincare Officer of Abellathena Life, LLC. With over 25 years of professional experience spanning corporate America, educational systems, and the beauty and wellness industry, she brings a unique blend of science, education and culturally responsive care to her work. She is a graduate of Prairie View Agricultural & Mechanical State University (PVAMU) and Georgia State University and brings a strong background in science, engineering, curriculum development, professional

training, and culturally responsive instruction.

As an Advanced Practice Licensed Esthetician, aesthetic trainer, and Certified Multicultural Skin Specialist, Alva is committed to helping people understand that skin and scalp health are deeply connected to stress, self-image, dignity, and healing. Her work emphasizes, culturally sensitive, healing-centered education and care that empower individuals to view self-care as a restorative practice that supports the mind, body, and soul.

“Learning to Exhale: Black Male Healing and Returning to Calm in the Body”



Naajee Dennis, MA, L is a clinician and program supervisor at the Domestic Abuse Project and has spent the past seven years working as a trauma therapist serving the Black community. Her work focuses on supporting individuals and families impacted by domestic violence and facilitating healing-centered groups that address the intersection of trauma, relationships, and community wellbeing.

Naajee facilitates men’s groups for individuals who have used abuse in their relationships supporting them in building accountability, emotional awareness, and healthier relational patterns. She also develops therapeutic curriculum used by staff in group sessions with men, women, and children who have been impacted by domestic violence, helping ensure programming is trauma-informed, accessible, and rooted in healing.

Her work integrates trauma-informed care, somatic awareness, and cultural responsiveness. practices that help individuals understand how trauma impacts the body, behavior, and emotional regulation. Naajee is also trained in restorative practices and incorporates these principles into her work to support accountability, repair, and community healing.

In addition to her clinical and program development work, Naajee facilitates trainings and workshops that equip providers and community members with practical tools to support nervous system regulation, relational safety, and sustainable healing within communities. She is passionate about creating spaces where individuals, particularly the Black community, can move beyond survival and reconnect with calm, safety, and wholeness in their bodies.

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“From the Mississippi Delta to Minnesota: Re-Examining What’s Possible in Conflict Through Restorative Conversations”



Jimmie L. Heags Jr. is the founder of life re-examined, a trauma-informed consulting practice focused on restorative dialogue, culturally responsive practice, and systems-level change. Originally from the Mississippi Delta and now based in Minnesota, his work explores how individuals and communities can slow down conflict, examine impact, and move toward meaningful repair.

With a background in school counseling, therapy, and restorative practice, Jimmie works with schools, community organizations, and leadership teams to transform conflict into opportunities for reflection, accountability, and healing. Through life re-examined, he helps people and institutions re-examine how they respond to harm and re-examine what is possible for relationships, systems, and community healing.

Meal Prep and The Busy Man”



Ramaj Young is a performance chef, educator, and founder of The Nourishment Network LLC, operating as Essence Athletics. With over a decade of experience in fine dining and private performance cooking, Ramaj works at the intersection of food sovereignty, athletic wellness, and community education. Ramaj currently works privately with professional athletes in the NFL on their personal diets as a performance meal prep stylist.

Through Essence Athletics, Ramaj delivers high-impact workshops that teach individuals how their relationship with food influences discipline, emotional regulation, and leadership. Their work centers on making food literacy accessible, culturally grounded, and rooted in dignity, especially within athletic and community spaces.

The Power You Already Hold: Raising, Protecting, and Building Our Children”



Leo Howard is a Black man, husband, and father whose work is deeply rooted in community, lived experience, and a commitment to the well-being of young people and their families. He is a community-centered advocate whose expertise sits at the intersection of early childhood development and supporting youth involved in the juvenile justice system.

Leo currently serves as a Program Manager at Greater Twin Cities United Way, where he supports initiatives such as 80x3 and Pathways Home. He also serves as an adjunct professor at the University of Minnesota, where he brings real-world experience into the classroom to support the next generation of leaders.

Grounded in both professional and lived experience, Leo approaches his work with the belief that communities already hold the knowledge and power needed for their own healing and transformation. He is a lifelong learner, continuously growing and evolving in his practice. At his core, Leo believes that all children can thrive when given the right support, and that families and communities, when resourced and recognized as experts, can be the driving force behind lasting change.

“From Pressure To Power: Trauma Informed Stress Relief For Black Men”



Drake Powe is a wellness coach and stress-relief facilitator whose work sits at the intersection of trauma-informed care, nervous system science, and Black community healing. Drawing on years of experience leading staff wellness sessions for public agencies, schools and community organizations, he specializes in creating spaces where Black men lay down their armor without losing dignity.

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Rooting in lived experience and cultural context, Drake's approach translates complex ideas about trauma, racism and the nervous system into plain language and simple repeatable practices. Participants consistently describe his sessions as "grounding," "real," and "unexpectedly powerful," because he pairs evidence-informed tools like breath-work, somatic grounding and micro-movement, with humor, story and a deep respect for the wisdom already in the room.

As a Mindfulness and Healing Coach, Drake has helped design and deliver bi-weekly stress-relief series and all-staff deescalation sessions, and community healing workshops that center African American men and the people who serve them. His mission is clear: to support Black men to move from constant pressure to embodied power, so they can care for themselves, their families and their communities without burning out or breaking down.

"Psychological Safety (PS) & Cultural Complicity"



Sean Jones is the founder of Ayr Safety Consultancy and a national safety leader who confronts the most dangerous risk in organizations and communities: silence. With 26 years of experience in Safety, he's been the worker, the supervisor, the manager, a veteran, a brother, son, husband, friend, father, and now, a business owner, not by enforcing toughness, but by breaking it. A sought-after keynote speaker, Sean challenges Black men and leaders to question who taught them that strength means suffering quietly, and why speaking up might be the most radical act of prevention.

"The Faith And Community Healing" Panel

The Panelist



Min. Isiah C. Dennis is a theologian, preacher, and justice advocate dedicated to liberation, discipleship, and community transformation. He was born and raised in Saint Paul, MN, in the historic Rondo Neighborhood, where he carries forward a legacy of resilience, community, and faith that influences his ministry. Grounded in the Black church tradition and Wesleyan theology, his work integrates prophetic preaching, pastoral care, and social justice.

He holds a Master of Divinity from Luther Seminary and a Master of Education in Youth Development and Leadership from the University of Minnesota. Min. Dennis is passionate about empowering others to live out their faith boldly, emphasizing the importance of building radically inclusive communities, deepening discipleship, and mobilizing the Church for justice and action.

Currently, he serves as the Coordinator of Ministry Operations at Camphor Memorial United Methodist Church. Additionally, he is a proud member of Iota Phi Theta Fraternity, Inc., a 2022 Fellow of the Josie R. Johnson Leadership Academy through the African American Leadership Forum, and Co-Chair of the board of the Wesley Foundation at the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities, known on campus as Neon.

Guided by the wisdom of bell hooks, Min. Dennis believes in the transformative power of truth: "If we can't recognize the truth, then it cannot liberate us from untruth. To know the truth is to prepare for it, for it is not mainly reflection and theory. Truth is divine action entering our lives and creating the human action of liberation."



Reginald Wiley is a purpose-driven leader whose career reflects a deep passion for advancing health equity and empowering underserved communities. Born in the vibrant Third Ward community of Houston, Texas, and currently serving as the Community Liaison for The Potter's House Apostolic Ministries. Reginald has faithfully served as a minister of the Gospel for over 20 years, demonstrating a lifelong commitment to faith, service, leadership, and community empowerment. Whether advancing healthcare innovation or uplifting communities through advocacy and ministry, Reginald stands as a respected leader at the intersection of health, technology, faith, and social justice.

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Pastor Brian Herron has been the Senior Pastor at Zion Baptist Church for 19 years. Pastor Herron is one of the Founders of the Healing Place at Zion Baptist Church, born out of his work with 21 Days of Peace. The Healing Place is a place where people can come and just sit and talk with someone, receive prayer, one-on-one coaching through trauma and grief, as well as referrals. Also, providing a quiet space to just sit and be for a while if needed.

He is also a Co-founder of The Wellness Collaborative, which comprises 16 organizations committed to working collectively to help heal our Community.

Pastor Herron is a community healer who offers grief and trauma coaching and training, one-on-one or in healing groups and circles. Pastor Herron is a champion of Justice for our community and works with men and women coming out of institutions of incarceration to help them transform their lives as they return to our communities and families.

He also leads a street ministry of presence, ministering to those who have been beaten, broken, and left by the side of the road, those who are hurting and often involved in the violence, drug use, and dealing in our community.

Pastor Herron's goal is wellness and wholeness for the African American Community as well as for others, so all are able to live and make better decisions and choices for themselves/us and their/our children.

Pastor Brian has been trained as a Mental Health First Aide Instructor for Youth and Adults and a Trauma Trainer for Sidran Institute Risking Connection Program and Stairstep Foundation, also Transform Mn. Healing The Wounds Of Trauma Facilitator and Facilitator Trainer. Pastor Herron has also completed 4 units of Clinical Pastoral Education

Pastor Herron is married to Rhonda Bell-Herron, and they have seven children, a host of grandchildren, and three great-grandchildren.



**Conference
Agenda**

**"When I dare to be powerful, to use my
strength in service of my vision, then it
becomes less and less important whether I
am afraid." Audrey Lorde**



**Conference
Survey**

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