

## Gang Activities and Prevention

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News that youth gangs were flourishing in our community came as a shock to many Fairfax County residents. Though the presence of gangs creates worry and concern, few people know much about them or what can be done to prevent them.

Surprisingly, there is no nationally accepted definition of a gang. The Fairfax County Police Department (FCPD) defines a gang as a group of people who form an allegiance for a common purpose, who engage in criminal activity and conform to one or more of the following traits; share common style of dress; frequently congregate upon, or lay claim to, a geographic location; and associate on a regular and continuous basis. The Fairfax County Public Schools (FCPS) define a gang as a group of three or more individuals who display antisocial behaviors, including joining together for recurring criminal activity, and who individually or together create a climate of fear and intimidation in the community.

Individual gangs come and go, but authorities estimate that there are more than 80 gangs in Fairfax County with a total of 1,500 to 2,500 gang members. About half of all gang members are currently enrolled in the school system. Bob Bermingham, Fairfax County's Gang Prevention Coordinator, indicates that while the gang problem in Fairfax County needs to be addressed, it is not an epidemic. The county population is 1.3 million, including over 165,000 school-age children (all of whom are categorized as "at-risk" for gang activity).

Several national gangs operate in our area, all originating in California. The largest and most notorious is **MS-13 (Mara Salvatrucha)** which operates in 31 states and Washington, DC. Started in the 1980s by Salvadorans confronted by Mexican gangs in Los Angeles, its members are now of Central American and Mexican descent. MS-13 is loosely structured in cliques of 5-200 members; there are 22 cliques in Northern Virginia. **Crips** originated in the 1960s and its members are mostly African American. Regionally, Crips are active as Rollin' 60s, 217 Crips, 434

Mob, etc. **Bloods** originated in the 1970s as a response to the Crips; its members may be from a variety of ethnicities. **18th Street** has a multi-ethnic membership and a reputation for violence. It is active throughout Northern Virginia with a heavy presence in the Manassas City area. **Tiny Rascal Gangsters (TRG)** is mainly of Asian ethnicity and has a reputation for violence.

**South Side Locos (SSL)** is a growing presence, active in Alexandria, Arlington, Woodbridge, Annandale and West Springfield. It is an offshoot of MS-13 and its members are of various ethnicities, including Hispanic, Asian, African American, and Caucasian. **Asian Criminal Enterprises (ACE)** is primarily interested in drug trafficking, and 6 identified local gangs are affiliated with it. Motorcycle gangs such as the **Hell's Angels** and the **Outlaws** are also present in Northern Virginia.

In 2003, there were 837 gang-related crimes in Fairfax County, 78 of which occurred in the public schools.<sup>1</sup> The most common felony is malicious wounding, with machetes and knives as the weapons of choice. These assaults are the product of fights between rival gangs and usually do not extend to the general public. While there are some car thefts, "there is little drug dealing and few sustained auto theft or robbery operations,"<sup>2</sup> activities in which gangs are implicated in other parts of the country. There are indications, however, that the West Coast gangs are encouraging their local counterparts to engage in these "economic" crimes. Locally, most gang activity is composed of property crimes, primarily spray painting identification messages (graffiti).

Graffiti is a territorial marker for gang activity. It indicates membership in a gang when drawn in school-books, desks or on personal property. Not all graffiti is gang-related. There are three major types. The first is the artistic variety found on the sides of our nation's highways, buildings, trucks, etc. Subtypes of this elaborate, artistic, and colorful graffiti are known as Tagging, Hip-Hop, Piecing and Bombing. The second

type of graffiti, rarer in the U.S., is political and usually consists of legible writing and occasionally symbols. The third type is gang related.

Gang graffiti is typically crude artistically, usually black and white or gang colors, and legible. The primary purpose is to identify the gang's territory (usually the neighborhood in which members live), or the gang's interest in making a new neighborhood or area its territory, and recruiting new members. Graffiti also serves as a warning or challenge to other gangs not to enter this territory or violence will ensue. When a rival gang crosses out territorial markers, it is taken as an insult leading either to retaliation or the backing down of the gang trying to establish new territory. Gangs also use their graffiti to identify individual gang members on surfaces at outdoor meeting areas (a roll-call); identify small groups or cliques in the larger or parent gang area; to honor dead members; and to chronicle recent histories of gang activity including violent assaults. This last variety is very valuable for police intelligence and investigations.

It is important to recognize graffiti for what it means. FCPD stresses the four **Rs**: **Recognize** it, **Read** it, **Report** it, and **Remove** it immediately. Because information contained in gang graffiti concerns membership, cliques, territories, and gang activities, reporting graffiti prior to its removal can be vital. Research has demonstrated that the rapid removal of graffiti is critical to preventing a gang invasion. The report to authorities leads to an immediate increased police presence in the area and alerts the gang to the presence of a concerned population in the neighborhood.

Tattoos are a form of gang graffiti identifying an individual's association with a gang, his personal philosophy and/or crimes committed on behalf of the gang. They can be located anywhere on the body and most members have more than one. The most common are the "three dots" and *Mi Vida Loca* (My Crazy Life) which expresses a philosophical attitude of "living only for the day."

Hand signs are also identifiers specific to each gang. The "throwing" of a hand sign distinguishes an individual as a gang member. Hand signs can require very difficult contortions and take much practice. The MS-13 hand sign is the same across the U.S. The use of a

hand sign by a non-member can have serious consequences for the presenter.

While gangs are loosely structured, there are different types of members. The leader is usually older, violent and ruthless. Hardcore members are often in their late teens and early twenties; they are completely immersed in the gang culture, and are willing to live and die by the rules of the gang. Associate, affiliate or fringe members have gone through the initiation process but may maintain relationships with their biological families. Wanna-bes are often between 11 and 13 years old. They are the recruits. They are not officially gang members, but like to talk and dress as if they were. This group can constitute up to two-thirds of an entire gang. Wanna-bes are a testing ground where kids will prove themselves to the core gang members.<sup>3</sup> " 'Wannabes are gonnabes,' said Prince George's County police Sgt. George Norris. 'A lot of the people that want to be a gang member are more dangerous than the actual gang members.' "<sup>4</sup>

### *Why do kids join gangs?*

The 2002 National Youth Gang Survey estimates that approximately 731,500 gang members and 21,500 gangs were active in the United States in 2002.<sup>5</sup> All large cities, 87% of smaller cities, 38% of suburban counties and 12% of rural counties reported youth gang problems.<sup>6</sup> "It is a myth that those who join gangs are always male and from low-income families in inner cities."<sup>7</sup> "Most gang members are boys, but 10% of all gang members are girls and the number is growing."<sup>8</sup> Many gangs include kids from "good," middle class families. Gang membership is not circumscribed by race or ethnicity; it is largely a reflection of the demographics of the surrounding community.<sup>9</sup> In a national sample of schools, a 2001 survey of gang problems and programs found that 7.1% of males and 3.6% of females belonged to a gang.<sup>10</sup> "In Fairfax, police say gangs have a presence in every high school."<sup>11</sup>

There is no single reason why so many kids join gangs, but their appeal appears to be growing. Gang members generally range in age from 13 to 21 years old but can be as young as 9 years old. "Most studies show that the family is the first line of defense in fighting gang activity. Conversely, these same studies show that the family can be the number one factor that

pushes a child toward a gang.”<sup>12</sup> Reasons for joining a gang include:

**Gangs Provide Identity and a Sense of Belonging:** It is normal for adolescents to gradually separate from their biological families and to form relationships and affiliations at school, work and in social groups. Many parents try to assure that these relationships are healthy, safe and reasonable choices. But when adolescents lack a stable home and positive role models, they tend to look for these qualities outside the home. Gangs promise to give their members respect, companionship, understanding, security and a sense of belonging. They provide role models and fulfill the needs of a loving family.<sup>13</sup> Kids get a sense of identity and recognition from being in a gang. It sets them apart from their classmates and family; they achieve status among their peers.<sup>14</sup>

**Fun and Excitement:** The mass media, through movies, music, and fashion, have glorified violence and the gang lifestyle. Repeated viewing of violent images in the media have desensitized youth to the realities of violent actions and contribute to romanticized perceptions of what gang life will really be like. Also, kids view their parent’s lives as boring and repetitive and believe that joining a gang will inure them from such a lifestyle. Boredom, in school or after school, is another reason for joining.

**Protection:** Protection is often one of the most important reasons to join. Gang membership can be considered a form of survival if one is living in a gang-infested community. “Gang neighborhoods are frequently dangerous places for both gang and non-gang members. Teens who are not gang members are continually harassed and beaten by those who are. Tired of being constantly questioned about their gang loyalties—and taken for a gang member by rival gangs—some adolescents decide they might as well join the gang.”<sup>15</sup>

**Peer Pressure:** Young people may be pressured to join a gang by friends who are already members. Vulnerable kids see both friendship and protection in a gang. Relatives or siblings of gang members may feel significant pressure to become part of the gang family, or to be with that family member and earn his approval.

**Financial Gain:** Being in a gang is often seen as a way to obtain money or possessions.

**A Failure to Understand What Being in A Gang Means:** Youth often do not fully understand the

danger, risks, and legal problems associated with being in a gang. Older gang members often use younger members to carry out criminal activities. Joining a gang requires being jumped in—beaten to prove that you are strong enough for the gang. Most gang violence targets rival gangs, so by joining a gang, a youth becomes a target himself.

### *Who is at risk for joining a gang?*

**Unsupervised youth:** Before school and after school, in wealthy and poor communities, kids are being left on their own. Nationally, “the number of women with children ages 6 to 17 working outside the home... is nearly 80%. Not only are more parents working, but their workdays and commutes are often longer... There are an estimated 4 million 6- to 12-year olds who are regularly without adult supervision before and after school... 15% are alone more than 10 hours a week. The numbers rise to 35% for 10- to 12-year olds and 44% for 12-year olds.”<sup>16</sup> Whether there is a single working parent, a dual income family, or adults absent from the home outside school hours for other reasons, youth who spend too much time unsupervised are at risk. Consistent adult contact with parents, role models or mentors is vital to preventing gang membership. A feeling of isolation makes a child vulnerable. The lack of adequate community youth support systems, such as after school programs, recreational activities, non-competitive sports, and Boys and Girls Clubs, contributes to growing gang recruitment efforts.

**Youth living in an area with a high level of gang activity:** The presence of gang activity encourages youth to join for reasons including peer pressure, protection, intimidation and threats against themselves, and potential violence against uninvolved family members.

**Youth lacking a positive support system:** When teens have low self-esteem and/or a sense of hopelessness about the future, gangs look like a way to be successful, especially if they are unable to succeed in more traditional ways such as school, sports or employment. Kids get a sense of power being in a gang. Alone, they are insecure and inadequate—belonging to a gang provides direction.

**Youth who have poor decision making and communication skills:** “Many teens believe that when a conflict or disagreement arises, they have no choice but to fight. Some see fighting as the only acceptable

way to resolve disagreements... Others do not know how to control themselves in the face of a perceived insult. In one survey of junior and senior high school students: 33 percent said that when they were really angry there was no way they could control themselves; 41 percent said that if they were challenged, they would fight; 21 percent said that avoiding fights was a sign of weakness."<sup>17</sup> Where there are poor conflict resolution skills, the ethos of the gang lifestyle offers great appeal.

**Youth living in poverty:** Youth living in poverty see barriers to educational opportunities and meaningful work. They may lack basic life skills and be poorly prepared to enter the work force. Their limited economic and employment prospects make them view gangs as a way of getting money and goods that they could not otherwise afford.

**Youth with problems at home:** Youth who have an unhappy home life or feel unloved; grow up with domestic violence and/or abuse; have substance abuse problems or suffer from those who do; or come from homes without strong role models, turn to gangs as a replacement for their family. Youth are also at risk in homes where there is parental denial of a gang problem; where siblings or other relatives are members of gangs; and where children are reunited with parents after long absences.

### ***What can be done about gangs?***

On July 12, 2004, the Board of Supervisors established the Fairfax County Coordinating Council on Gang Prevention and funded a Gang Prevention Coordinator position. On February 25, 2005, the Gang Prevention Summit brought over 300 people with responsibility for addressing the problem—representatives of County agencies, police, schools, community and faith based organizations, together to generate ideas to combat gang violence. A commitment was made to implement the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention's Comprehensive Gang Model. The Northern Virginia Regional Gang Task Force has funded an assessment of regional gang activity and the Model will be targeted and implemented based upon this assessment.

The Model's five strategies are: **Community Mobilization:** Involve residents, youth, community and agencies; **Social Intervention:** Provide social services to gang youths and their families through agencies,

schools, and other organizations; **Opportunities Provision:** Develop educational, training and employment programs targeted to gang and other at-risk youths; **Suppression:** Supervise and monitor gang youth by criminal justice system agencies; **Organizational Change and Development:** Use resources more effectively, for example, include youth in the development of gang prevention programming and bring services directly to the communities. The Model will take time to plan and implement. It will incorporate many of the strategies now in use for preventing gang activity.

Currently, Fairfax County uses a three-pronged approach to countering gangs: suppression, prevention, and intervention. Suppression is the law enforcement dominated approach, which includes intelligence gathering, surveillance, and arrest. Prevention is aimed at keeping kids from becoming involved with gangs. Intervention actions are those that are aimed at children on the verge of joining gangs or those who want to get out of gangs. All three are simultaneously required to combat the gang problem.

### **Suppression**

Suppression of criminal gang activity is the function of the police departments. In 1997, Fairfax County PD was the first in the metro area to set up a unit to deal with gang activities. Of the County's 1,332 officers, there are currently 2 supervisors and 10 investigators employed in the Gang Unit, plus one or two gang coordinators at each precinct. The City of Fairfax PD has 64 officers including one detective who is assigned full-time to anti-gang activities. Established in 2003, the Northern Virginia Regional Gang Task Force pools the efforts of FCPD's Gang Unit with those of the FBI, ATF, ICE, DEA and other regional law enforcement agencies (City of Fairfax PD, Herndon PD, Manassas PD, Manassas Park PD, Prince William County PD, Virginia State Police, Leesburg PD, Loudoun County PD), resulting in a more coordinated law enforcement and public information effort. The FCPD has further enhanced analysis of gang activity by creating a county-wide database that utilizes information from gang coordinators in each precinct, School Resource Officers (SROs- police officers assigned to schools), interviews and other sources. Captain Deborah Burnett, Commander of Youth Services for the FCPD, has high praise for the effectiveness of the database in

discerning patterns of gang activity.

New anti-gang laws are aimed at (i) broadening the definition of a criminal street gang and increasing the penalties on gang criminal activities and (ii) giving police and other law enforcement authorities more resources to fight gang crime. The 2004 laws addressed specific problems encountered in handling gang activities. They extend the provisions against recruiting juveniles into a gang to include recruiters under 18 years of age; make it a felony to use or threaten force against an individual, or a member of his/her household, to encourage gang membership; and outlaw the hazing of recruits. The 2004 statutes also provided for forfeiture of gang assets, addressed the problem of intimidation of witnesses, and enabled multi-jurisdictional grand juries to pursue widespread gang activity. Additional provisions made it illegal to carry a concealed machete; provide the Attorney General with authority to seek a wiretap order; allow the state Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organization (RICO) Act to be applied to gang activity; and require police to notify the school superintendent when a juvenile is arrested for gang-related crimes. Major 2005 amendments created gang-free school zones; added more criminal acts to the definition of a gang; further protected witnesses by allowing them to keep their home and work address and telephone number secret; and provided a minimum fine of \$500 for gang graffiti.<sup>18</sup>

### **Prevention**

Prevention is aimed at keeping kids from becoming involved with gangs. It includes educating children and their families about the dangers of gangs, and providing safe havens for children outside school hours. Gang prevention presentations are most often focused at 7th and 8th graders and their parents since it is at that age that many youth join gangs. But authorities believe that the K-6 population is at risk as well and presentations should start at elementary school levels, giving the message that there are good, fun alternatives to joining a gang.

FCPD and FCPS have presented over 1000 talks in our community and our schools in the past year. Unfortunately, many parents work two jobs to support their families and have no free time to attend the meetings. Another difficulty is lack of trust—immigrants have

become scared of the government and shy away from approaching officials. It can also be very difficult to reach parents who do not speak English. Officials know they must improve their ability to get to those hard-to-reach communities and are working on strategies to do so.

Prevention and intervention include providing a variety of safe, adult-supervised after-school and summer programs. These programs can be run by FCPS (sports, drama, music, art), the Office of Children (SACC), the Parks and Recreation Department (RecPac), or community or faith-based organizations. There is also a great need for less formal intramural sports programs and clubs.

Schools would seem to be a good place for after school/evening activities, but do not have the support staff, volunteers or resources. In 2004-2005, the School Aged Child Care program (SACC), which provides before and after school care in the elementary schools, served 13,000 kids—8,000 during the school year and 5,000 in the summer. About 3,000 more were on waiting lists. The RecPac Program, which is also based in elementary schools and serves grades K - 6, operates only from July 5 - Aug 11. RecPac served all 8,000 children who applied for it this summer. Most middle schools have after school programs three days per weeks. According to Bob Bermingham, Board of Supervisors Chairman Connolly is committed to making schools more available to the community after school hours. In cooperation with the Parks and Recreation Department, the goal is to make every school a community accessible building, without burdening school administrators, who have different duties.

Ironically, those youngsters most at risk may not be able to take advantage of the after school care programs that are available since there are a limited number of slots available. There is little transportation available—the schools do not have enough buses and cannot help. Faith-based and community organizations are willing to help but are concerned with liability, inability to recruit volunteers to supervise children, clean up after them, and provide needed supplies and equipment. And for these organizations, the issue is once again transportation—how to get the kids to the programs and then home, often at 8:00 p.m.

### Intervention

Many intervention efforts dovetail with prevention efforts, especially those that provide adult-supervised, safe havens outside school. Intervention efforts are those that are aimed at children who want to get out of gangs or are on the verge of joining gangs. Intervention will have the greatest likelihood of success with the wanna-bes. Associates may be approachable, but it is unlikely that intervention will have any effect on core members.

It is a common belief that once in a gang you can never get out alive. Although it is not risk free, members do quit gangs. Intervention programs try to turn members to jobs and other interests and then help them to quietly “fade away” from gang activities. Fading away is the most common current method for individuals desiring to leave a gang. They stop going to meetings, wear non-gang apparel, and become “busy” with family and school activities. Fairfax County is currently putting together a team of human service professionals to help individual members get out. The County has also initiated a tattoo removal program using volunteer doctors for gang members desiring to leave gangs. If fading away is not possible, a family may have to relocate to escape a gang.

Clothing, jewelry, and manner of grooming are used by gang members to identify each other, challenge rival members, look “cool” and solicit new members. Gang members, using these identifiers, “front” for the gang by demonstrating a visible and appealing gang presence. A few FCPS middle schools, supported by their PTAs, have gone to strict dress codes in the hope that it would be more difficult for gangs to recruit and easier for students to “fade away” from gang membership. Strict dress codes are being considered in other Fairfax County Public Schools.

Gang recruiting is becoming more aggressive, especially at the middle school level. FCPS has planned evening meetings at all middle schools this fall to reach parents since these children are most at risk.

The Healthy Choices anti-gang program will be instituted in all middle schools this fall. This month-long program will be taught in health and physical education programs by an officer and a teacher.

Each high school and middle school is assigned a School Resource Officer (SRO) who is usually present all day. The SRO is involved in numerous activities to prevent youth gang involvement. SROs are “experienced law-enforcement officers with proven ability to work effectively with adolescents and young adults, and who are capable of performing multiple law-enforcement, instructional and mentoring roles in the school environment.”<sup>19</sup>

Job placements offer a positive identity to a youth, keep him busy, and provide a good “excuse” for not joining a gang, besides providing needed spending money.

The City of Fairfax PD presents anti-gang programs in the schools and the community. Officers teach both the Drug Abuse Resistance Education (DARE) and Gang Resistance Education and Training (GREAT) programs in the schools.

The FCPD’s Gang Unit is concentrating heavily on public education and awareness programs with neighborhood meetings and distribution of information, in English and Spanish, on what to do and where to call if your child is in a gang or at risk. Each precinct has an officer who specializes in gang issues and can be called if needed. The Northern Virginia Regional Task Force has tip line at 1-800-NO-GANGS.

### ***Recognizing and Preventing Gang Involvement***

Parents should look for multiple signs to indicate possible gang involvement because some of these indicators alone, such as clothes or musical preferences, are also common among youth not involved in gangs.

#### **Warning Signs That Your Child May Be Involved with a Gang**

- Admits to "hanging out" with kids in gangs or changes friends suddenly
- Shows an unusual interest in one or two particular colors of clothing or a particular logo; wears altered headwear, gets special haircuts, eyebrow markings, or tattoos; wears belt buckles, hats, and other clothing items to either the right or left side
- Has an unusual interest in gangster-influenced music, videos, movies, or websites
- Uses unusual hand signals to communicate with friends
- Has

specific drawings or gang symbols on school books, clothes, walls, or tattoos ● Comes home with unexplained physical injuries, cash, or goods ● Carries a weapon ● Exhibits negative changes in behavior such as withdrawing from family; declining school attendance; staying out late without reason; displaying an unusual desire for secrecy; exhibiting signs of drug use; breaking rules consistently; speaking in gang-style slang.

### What Parents Can Do to Prevent Gang Involvement

- Praise your child/children for doing well and encourage them to do their very best
- Set limits for your children and enforce them
- Get involved in your children's education and encourage them to have good study habits and stay in school
- Be a positive role model
- Teach them to set positive goals, to hold high standards and to prepare for a positive future
- Know your child's friends and their families
- Teach your child how to cope with peer pressure and develop good conflict/resolution skills
- Encourage your child to participate in positive after-school activities with adult supervision
- Know where your children are at all times and schedule activities to occupy their free times
- Explain to your child that he or she should NOT: associate with gang members; attend parties or social events sponsored by gangs; use gang hand signs, symbols, or language; wear gang-style clothing or gang colors; write graffiti on any surface, including their bodies
- Talk with your child about the dangers and consequences of gang involvement
- Explain to your children that only a very small percentage of youth join gangs
- Tell them that you: disapprove of gangs; don't want to see them hurt or arrested; see them as special and worth protecting; want to help them with problems;
- Teach them that family members don't keep secrets from each other
- Tell them that you and other parents are working together against gangs.

### Conclusion

The number of young people being served by gang prevention and intervention programs cannot be quantified by county officials. Neither can the number of underserved youth. County officials stress that although gang membership is relatively low, if not addressed proactively, gang issues will grow and cause more of an emotional and financial burden. Gangs and

their activities challenge the County's fundamental mission to keep every neighborhood and community safe.

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## Program Announcements

Rona Ackerman

I would like to thank the committee that prepared this months' program material. They wrote it over the summer, in between vacations, with only seven weeks in which to get it done. Please thank them in person if you have a chance, for their tremendous effort. My apologies to our two new Prince William units—we were not able to adequately address Prince Williams' gang-related issues in this short time frame.

In October and November we will be conducting two programs on dates other than your unit's regularly scheduled meeting. We hope that you will put them on your calendar and join us. The first is on Sunday, Oct 30 at 2:00 pm, at the Pohick Regional Library. LWVFA and the Fairfax County Public Library will present "**Building a Safer World: Can America and the UN Work Together on World Water Resources?**" Dr. Gerald Galloway will discuss water resources, terrorism, conservation and other water supply topics. Currently at the University of Maryland, Dr. Galloway is a Visiting Scholar at the US Army Corps of Engineers Institute for Water Resources and has served as a water resources consultant to a variety of national and international government organizations. This program is funded by a grant from The People Speak and the League of Women Voters Education Fund (LWVUS). The Pohick Regional Library is located at 6450 Sydenstricker Road in Burke. Please call 703-644-7333 to reserve your seat for this free program.

The **CEDAW Forum** will be on Saturday, November 12, at 1:30 pm at the Ernst Cultural Center, Northern Virginia Community College in Annandale. LWVFA has received a \$1,000 grant to conduct a program on the United Nations **Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)**, known informally as the "international bill of women's rights." It was signed by President Carter, but never ratified by the Senate. It has been ratified by 180 countries, including all other western nations. CEDAW is considered by some to be a powerful instrument for promoting gender equality. Information on CEDAW will be published in the November Bulletin to help members prepare for the Forum. This is part of a series of forums on "Women Engaging Globally," a program of the League of Women Voters Education Fund (LWVUS), the Center for Women Policy Studies, and the Women's Environment and Development Organization, made possible through a generous grant from the Open Society Institute-DC Office.



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