

# How To Save Lives Without Scaring Tourists Away

Ocean safety experts, tourism officials, lawmakers and families who have lost loved ones have definite ideas about keeping visitors safe in Hawaii.

ABOUT 16 HOURS AGO • BY NATHAN EAGLE

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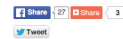
Jordan Zimmerman demands more from Hawaii.

More lifeguards, more warning signs. More accountability from guidebook authors. More leadership from elected officials.

Her 31-year-old daughter, Jamie Zimmerman, a doctor and journalist for ABC News, drowned Oct. 12 after being swept into the ocean near a river mouth at a beach on the north shore of Kauai, just hours before she was set to fly back home to New York.

"She was my present and my future. Without her I am alone," Zimmerman wrote on her Facebook wall Nov. 20. It's just one of many [memorial posts](#) she's penned since her daughter's death.

Jordan Zimmerman has become an unlikely evangelist for visitor safety in Hawaii, attracting others who have lost loved ones in the islands. Together, they have commiserated, offered condolences and raised money to boost ocean safety.



Beachgoers watch large surf at Ehukai, site of the famous Banzai Pipeline on the North Shore of Oahu.

Their messages, and myriad others like them, are not lost on local policymakers, water-safety advocates and tourism officials, who insist that it's important to continue searching for ways to make Hawaii a safer destination.

Still, it's unlikely that will mean one day having lifeguards at every beach, placing signs at every dangerous place, maintaining all the trails that traverse the mountains or having a year when no tourist died. People will ignore the warnings, their personal limits and even their own better judgment.

"I don't know if we'll ever get down to zero," said Sue Kanoho, executive director of the Kauai Visitors Bureau. "We just can't control everyone's behavior."

But Kanoho and others point to relatively simple solutions that don't take a lot of money, just some ingenuity and the political will to make it happen.

## Stay True To The Message

Getting safety information in front of visitors is just part of the challenge; the manner it's presented can be a sensitive topic.

Industry leaders and government officials say it's imperative to strike a balance so that the messaging preserves the state's image as an idyllic tourist destination while also being useful to keep tourists safe.



Cory Lum/Civil Beat

Senate President Ron Kouchi said visitor safety has been an issue for years.

In practice, this has meant videos and brochures that offer pleasant advice but don't present realistic consequences. It's the opposite approach of a campaign against meth, for instance, that uses startling images to warn people of the drug's dangerous effects.

Senate President Ron Kouchi, who represents Kauai and was tagged by Zimmerman in some of her Facebook posts, said as a state lawmaker and former county councilman he understands the significant resources that have been put toward visitor safety.

"There's been extensive outreach to hotels and rental car companies to educate our visitors about the dangers here," Kouchi said. "We'll continue to work with them, but this has been something that's been of great concern for years."



Hawaii Tourism Authority's new visitor-greeting video from Civil Beat on Vimeo

The oft-repeated call for in-flight videos is fading. Convincing more than 20 airlines that bring in millions of tourists to show a short safety video about the common hazards in Hawaii has proven difficult, if not futile, despite how simple the concept sounds, officials say.

There's a lack of willingness on the part of the airlines not to mention logistical challenges and cost factors, they say.

Kanoho said the reality today is that passengers are more interested in their cell phones, iPads and laptops during the flight. Gone are the days of a captive audience glued to a single airline-controlled screen.



Courtesy: Hawaiian Airlines

"It's not going to happen," she said, "and I don't think it'd be effective anymore."

Hawaiian Airlines is open to the idea of having an in-flight safety video, officials say.

Nonetheless, the Hawaii Tourism Authority recently created a new in-flight safety video under a 2013 legislative mandate. The measure drew support from many, including Mike McCartney, now Gov. David Ige's chief of staff who was head of HTA at the time, and Gregg Stueber, a career firefighter and rescue specialist in Hawaii.

"The State of Hawaii does an excellent job promoting the beauty and culture of our islands, encouraging visitors to partake in activities on land and sea," Stueber told lawmakers at the time. "I am encouraged that the State is now recognizing the added importance of delivering a message of safety awareness at a time when visitors' minds are focused on fun and adventure."

He said there is no better time and venue than to deliver that message as a part of the inbound flight experience.



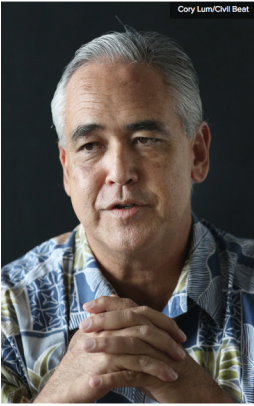
Cory Lum/Civil Beat

View of Waikiki hotel skyline from the Kapahulu groin.

"Currently we are working with our airline consultants to encourage airlines to work with us for this initiative, and hopefully get this video played on all incoming flights," said HTA's Jadie Goo, whose responsibilities with the agency include safety programs, the China and Taiwan markets, and workforce development.

Hawaiian Airlines has been open to the idea, she said, although company officials did not respond to requests for comment for this story.





Mike McCartney, the governor's chief of staff, says helping visitors stay safe is part of being a good host.

Dr. Monty Downs, a Kauai emergency room physician who has spent decades working to improve ocean safety, said Hawaiian Airlines used to show a safety video several years ago.

So he and Kanohe reached out to other airlines to see if they would do it, too. But they never received a response, he said.

"It's a wonderful idea," he said. "But I'm not going to be the guy that can achieve that."

And it's unlikely that lawmakers would approve some sort of mandate requiring safety videos to be shown on incoming flights.

McCartney said a state law would be hard to pass, in part because it could affect federal aviation laws.

He still supports an "arrival video" shown by airlines that would go over everything from how to deboard the plane and where to get your luggage to safety information about the ocean and trails.

"We've just got to figure out how to do that," he said.

Instead, safety videos are playing in places the state controls, such as the baggage carousels at the Kauai and Maui airports.



Hawaii Tourism Authority's Jadie Goo says the agency is working on mobile apps and in-flight videos to promote visitor safety.

A 16-year-old boy saw the video at the Lihue Airport and used the information to help save his father from drowning on the north shore of Kauai, officials said.

But aside from a few anecdotal success stories, there's doubt about how many people actually see them.

"Probably 5 percent of people picking up a bag are looking at it," Downs said. "The rest are focused on the carousel."

## Honolulu County Beaches, Beachgoers and Rescues

	Beachgoers	Rescues
Ala Moana	2,248,103	44
Alii/Haleiwa	330,013	98
Bellows	75,323	9
Chuns Reef	223,209	110
Ehukai	397,746	117
Hanauma Bay	1,082,475	557
Kaliua	515,598	23
Kauwawala	153,968	35
Kawaena	221,966	36
Kualoa	164,840	5
Lanikai	340,250	95
Mali	379,587	28
Makaha	434,357	67
Makapuu	132,780	313
Nanakuli	530,264	113
Pokai Bay	369,865	2
Sandy Beach	344,011	438
Sunset	318,219	57
Waikiki	8,269,410	464
Waimanalo	267,983	16
Waimea	540,441	125

2014 data provided by Honolulu County's ocean safety division.

Share

Infogram

Kauai Ocean Safety Director Kalani Vierra said an in-flight video would be ideal.

"While we are fortunate — and grateful — to have an airport safety video at the baggage claim area of the Lihue Airport, ideally we could offer an in-flight safety video for all incoming flights to Hawaii, as that would be the most efficient way of reaching our visitors," he said.

"In the meantime, we work closely with the visitor industry to make safety outreach as accessible and convenient as possible," he said, including training hotel staff, sponsoring [Kauai Explorer](#) and distributing beach safety guides as far and wide as possible.

And there are ideas on how to make better use of technology, such as cell-phone alerts that pop up when approaching potentially dangerous areas.

The Hawaii Tourism Authority is developing a mobile app that offers safety education, Goo said.

"We're looking at ways to adapt to today's and the future traveler," she said.  
"Everyone has a mobile phone or an iPad."

### Reach More People In More Places

More tourists are visiting Hawaii than ever. The state touts record arrivals, which reached 7.2 million visitors from January to October.

But it's not just the sheer numbers that are changing. It's the type of visitor, according to lifeguards and state officials.



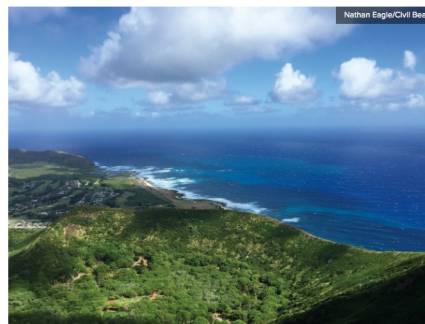
Visitors climb over the cliffs, ignoring signs warning to stay within the fenced-in area at the lookout as mist shoots up from the Halona Blowhole on Oahu.

John Silberstein, administrator of the Honolulu Ocean Safety Division, said there's a GoPro and YouTube culture out there to contend with now. People want to take videos of themselves and share them widely, and those clips inspire other people to go do the same thing or even try to one-up them.

Growing up on Oahu, he said, he never saw people hiking down the back side of Koko Crater. The ground is crumbly, the trail isn't well maintained and it's simply not a very safe hike.

Now, with social media and online sites [explaining how to access it](#) and touting the trail's "coolness" with countless selfies, Silberstein said he constantly sees people climbing it.

"Tourists are a lot more adventurous," he said. "It's the same in the water. There's been a crazy explosion of surf schools and stand-up paddle schools. Some of them don't take as much care as they did when it was a smaller industry."



More adventurous tourists now hike the back side of Koko Crater on the rim, which is more dangerous than going up the popular front side up which traverses old railroad ties.

Rep. Tom Brower, who chairs the House Tourism Committee, said millennials in particular are more prone to take risks.

"This is the growing pains of the Internet promoting travel, and these are new issues that we have to tackle," he said. "People have access to information on every square inch in the islands."

#### BE PREPARED

These websites contain important information that can keep you safe.

• [Hawaii Beach Safety](#):

Updates every 15 minutes with ocean conditions at beaches around the state, current surf and wind reports and the latest hazards and warnings.

• [Kauai Explorer](#): Good

information about beaches and trails on the Garden Isle including safety tips.

Part of that means playing catch-up, Silberstein said, whether it's new ways to deploy a roving lifeguard unit or reaching incoming visitors with safety information.

"It's indicative of a lot of things in Hawaii," he said. "We seem behind the curve a little bit."

Other coastal communities like San Diego seem a bit more advanced when it comes to their equipment and facilities, Silberstein said.

"But in Hawaii, as far as personnel, we have the best watermen and waterwomen in the world," he said. "They've been grooming themselves for this profession their whole lives, perhaps unknowingly."



Including safety tips.

• [Hawaii Department of Land and Natural Resources](#): Safety advice based on activities, from snorkeling to body surfing, plus information about staying safe in the outdoors while hiking.

• [National Weather Service](#): Updated information about the latest ocean warnings, surf and weather forecasts and safety advice.

• [Hawaii Tourism Authority](#): Travel safety tips from the state's largest tourism agency.

• [Visitor Aloha Society of Hawaii](#): Helps visitors who have suffered a tragedy, including crime victims.

McCartney says continuing the educational process is a must.

"It's just part of being responsible and of being a good host," he said. "There's no silver bullet that we're going to have this huge source of money so we can do everything we want to do."

Some 8.8 million visitors are expected to spend nearly \$16 billion in fiscal 2016, which ends June 30, according to the state Department of Business, Economic Development and Tourism. The tourism industry is expected to generate more than \$1.6 billion in state tax revenue.

Part of that revenue comes from a 9.25 percent transient accommodations tax that the state collects from anyone who stays at a hotel, time share or bed and breakfast. The four counties received a combined \$103 million from the tax in fiscal 2016 to offset the cost of providing services that visitors use, including lifeguards and emergency responders, parks, roads and sewers.

The money only goes so far though.

"The problem is, especially on Kauai, you're never going to get to where you need to be," said Downs, the Kauai emergency room doctor.

### More Lifeguards In More Places

For all the informational efforts, nothing beats lifeguards, according to government officials and ocean-safety advocates.

"Having an actual lifeguard on the beach is the best way to prevent injury and death," said Cary Kayama, Maui ocean safety supervisor. "All the signage, all the brochures, all the videos are not going to stop it. We'll post a sign and flag but people don't take it seriously. They'll throw a towel over it."



Lifeguard Josh Guerra helps a visitor who cut his foot at Hanauma Bay.

While guarding additional beaches remains a costly endeavor — and therefore unlikely — there are signs that conditions for emergency personnel and first responders are improving.

In 2013, the Legislature passed a bill to make county lifeguards their own collective bargaining unit "so they could be treated fairly," said Kouchi, the Senate president. Prior to that they were lumped in with a [Hawaii Government Employees Association](#) unit primarily consisting of secretaries.



A lifeguard tower at a beach in Hanalei Bay known as Pine Trees.

The lifeguards are negotiating their first contract since becoming their own bargaining unit. Still, it's unclear whether that will result in more lifeguards at more beaches, pay raises, expanded hours or new equipment.

The governor's proposed budget for next fiscal year, which starts July 1, left out pay raises for union members so it's unknown how much additional money, if any, may be going to water safety officers. The Legislature will likely take that up next session, which starts Wednesday, after the contract is finalized.

"Anytime you can have a lifeguard on scene dramatically increases one's chance of survival." — Shayne Enright, Honolulu Ocean Safety spokeswoman

And increasing the number of lifeguards is going to take money.

On Kauai, for example, there are 10 lifeguard towers and 65 beaches. One tower costs about \$400,000 a year to staff year-round with five water safety officers, Downs said, making it unrealistic that all the beaches will ever be guarded.

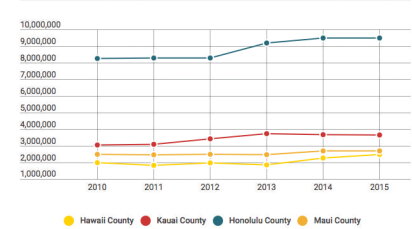
There has been talk in the counties of at least expanding operational hours at beaches that are already staffed.

Lifeguards say people start going to the beach before dawn, about two hours before the lifeguards get there. At the end of the day, many stay for sunset after the

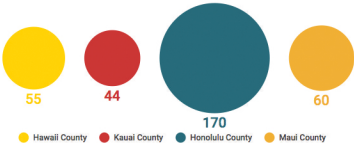
lifeguards go home.

"It's an idea that we're thinking about, but we're not there yet," Honolulu Ocean Safety spokeswoman Shayne Enright said. "Anytime you can have a lifeguard on scene dramatically increases one's chance of survival."

### County Ocean Safety Budgets



### Full-time Lifeguards



“ Having an actual lifeguard on a beach is the best way to prevent injury and death.   
*Cary Kayama, Ocean Safety Supervisor for Maui County*

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At one point, Downs had a goal of reducing drownings by 50 percent over a set number of years — trying to tackle the problem like eradicating tobacco smoking. But he, like others, have since shied away from such strategies.

"It's proven to be too flighty of an idea unfortunately," he said.

Part of the problem is that the numbers are too small and inconsistent, he said, noting that one year there were only three drownings on Kauai but the next there were 17. There were at least five visitor drownings on Kauai in 2015.

"What I do hang my hat on is that 10 drownings would be 20 if it weren't for what we're doing," Downs said, noting in particular the rescue tube program that has taken off statewide.

#### Be Innovative And Build On Good Ideas

The rescue tube program, administered by the Rotary Club of Kauai, has been Downs' biggest focus for the past several years.

And it's catching on around Hawaii.

More than 200 rescue tubes have been affixed to metal poles at unguarded beaches around Kauai since 2007, and Downs has logged at least 120 instances of them being used in rescues.

"I've personally shaken hands with seven people who would be dead if they hadn't been there," he said.

In November, he said, an off-duty lifeguard saw three women in distress around dusk at Kealia Beach on the east side of Kauai and used a rescue tube to save them.

Hawaii island and Maui are also installing the rescue tubes, but Oahu has been hesitant, concerned that the tubes would mean an additional person is put in a dangerous situation by encouraging their use.

Honolulu tried rescue tubes in the past at Kailua Beach, Enright said, but they all went missing.

"We continue to look at that as an option but there are major risks that can't be taken lightly," she said. "You could be giving someone a false sense of hope that they can help someone in these waters, and we could have two fatalities."

She said it's worked well on Kauai, but noted that Kauai has fewer lifeguards — and resources — than Honolulu.

"It's not the best thing to do, but it's better than doing nothing," Kayama, the Maui



This rescue tube at Anini Beach is one of more than 200 that community members places around Kauai at mostly unguarded beaches.



ocean safety supervisor, said.

He said the tubes are going up along a 3-mile stretch of coastline between Honokowai and Waikele on the west side of the island.

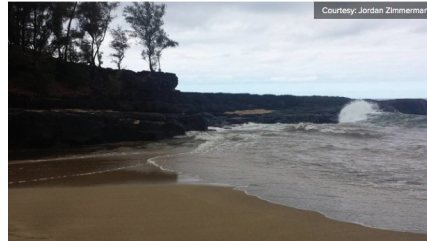
"We want more visitors. It drives our economy," he said. "We just got to stop them from getting hurt."

### Demand That Safety Be A Priority

Jordan Zimmerman has been effective at using social media to demand action.

She's asked people to boycott Andrew Doughty's best-selling guidebooks after finding "Kauai Revealed" in her daughter's bag.

She said the first reference to Lumahai Beach, where Jamie died, should include information about its dangers in addition to its beauty. The main entry under the Beaches section describes at length how unsafe it can be there, but Zimmerman feels some, including her daughter, may not read that far.



A view of the area on Lumahai Beach near where Jamie Zimmerman drowned.

"I am not asking Doughty to update his guidebooks; I am DEMANDING it!" she wrote on Facebook. "Had he done so when others asked, my only child, a journalist @ABC, medical doctor, author, and meditation teacher, who loved all people and had dedicated her life to making the world a better place, might still be here."

Doughty did not return a message seeking comment. But he has taken steps to update the book by pulling out references to some places entirely and emphasizing the dangers of certain trails, tide pools and beaches. Until Jamie Zimmerman died, there had not been a drowning for years at Lumahai, one of many unguarded beaches on Kauai.

"If you're looking for a huge, picture-perfect stretch of sand on the north shore, Lumahai shouldn't be missed," the guidebook now says. "If you're looking for safe swimming, Lumahai shouldn't be touched. ... The waves here, even small ones, are frighteningly powerful."



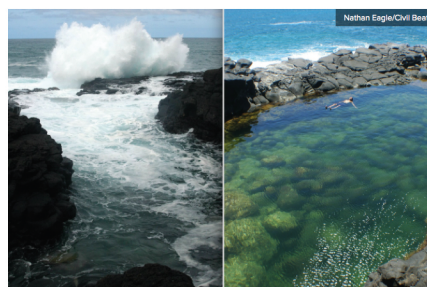
People have taken it upon themselves to make signs like this one to warn hikers of how many people have died, in this case swimming at Hanakapiai Beach on the north shore of Kauai.

Kouchi backed a bill in 2011 that would have held guidebook authors and online sites [liable for deaths or accidents](#) that happen at places they recommended. The legislation was rejected amid concerns that it encroached on First Amendment rights.

Guidebooks have taken the concerns over visitor safety more seriously with each edition. "Kauai Revealed" cut out descriptions of Kipu Falls and noted how dangerous Queen's Bath can be, particularly in the winter months.

Still, even the latest edition of the popular blue guidebook have people [posting reviews](#) on Amazon saying that ocean safety needs to be emphasized more.

"While the ocean safety section is very good, not every reader will scour every page for information (as I do). The writers do emphasize the dangerous beaches where it's almost never safe to swim, but it took several editions before they got around to mentioning how many people drown at Queen's Bath, a feature that is highlighted," Sweet Alyssum wrote in her five-star review of the book.



Queen's Bath, a popular slightly off-the-beaten path place to visit on the north shore of Kauai, is seen here in the winter, at left, and summer.

"To me, it's unconscionable to encourage people to go to these types of places," Kouchi said, noting the tide pools at Queen's Bath as an example. Numerous people have died there, often while visiting the north shore site in the winter when the surf is pounding — far from the calm waters portrayed in summer photos.

"Unfortunately, people on vacation are adventurous and trying to look for those hidden gems and have one of those once-in-a-lifetime experiences," he said.

Zimmerman, who did not return messages requesting an interview for this story, has also encouraged people to widely share a Facebook post urging government officials to "take more responsibility to keep visitors safe."

"I am hearing from many people whose loved ones have drowned off #Hawaii while vacationing there. I am distressed by these reports of lives lost — some after Jamie's tragic accident. This is not a new phenomenon by any means," she said.



Jamie Zimmerman drowned in October at Lumahai Beach on Kauai.

Zimmerman thinks the state should add a 1 percent "Safety Tax" on lodging to pay for more lifeguards and additional signage at beaches.

"While this won't bring back my precious child #JamieZimmermanMD or Jessie Schlossmann's devoted father, it will save others," she said. "It's now time for the governments in Hawaii to do all they possibly can to save lives! How about it Hawaii?"

In the meantime, other surviving family members are raising money on their own and donating it to nonprofits to use to improve safety measures, whether it's buying more hazard signs or new equipment for lifeguards.



Corey Schlossmann walks his daughter down the aisle at a wedding on Kauai, two days before he drowned there.

Corey Schlossmann, a 60-year-old California resident, drowned while swimming at Shipwreck's on Oct. 24, two days after walking his daughter down the aisle at her wedding on Kauai.

Now his daughter, Jessie, has been working to raise money for more signage and lifeguards for the beach. As of Thursday, she'd raised \$2,550 out of her [goal of \\$125,000](#).

Jordan Zimmerman is also trying to raise money privately to help improve ocean safety in Hawaii. She's [raised \\$5,650](#) over the past month to install prominent signage at Lumahai Beach that uses Google Earth color photos to describe the hazards there, including where the rip currents are located and the threat of rogue waves.

She also hopes enough money can be raised to create a roving lifeguard program that would pay for a lifeguard and vehicle to patrol unguarded beaches.

### Fight The Sense Of Futility

Ocean safety advocates and government officials see visitor deaths as an inevitability.

Brower said the state obviously needs to warn people of the dangers in Hawaii and consider restricting certain areas in extreme cases.

But he isn't convinced spending more money to put lifeguards on remote beaches, for instance, is reasonable or practical.

"Everyone wants to do something and keep people safe," he said. "But if we're going to experience life, there's an element of potential danger."



A wave surprises beachgoers at Ehukai who were sitting too close while watching a Pipeline surf contest.



The hearts of family members who have lost loved ones in Hawaii are in the right place, Brower said, as far as wanting to raise money to add more signs or put up new lifeguard towers. But realistically, is it a good use of taxpayer money to install and then maintain a tower at a remote beach that few will go to anyway?

"We're in a free and open society," he said. "We have a lot of land near the water that people go to. Often the surroundings don't look as dangerous as they are, and often people visiting get in over their head."

Part of the problem is unprecedented access to information, Brower said.

"This is the time we live in right now, where people just aren't as careful as they were about these things," he said. "People see something interesting on the Internet so they want to experience that, and they may not realize the dangers that may be involved."



Visitors to Lanai Lookout on Oahu hopped over a wall, disregarding "Danger" signs, to pose for photographs.

At best, Brower said, there should be a reasonable lifeguard service that's adequately funded. And he believes an in-flight video has merit if it cautions visitors about how "the ocean isn't always your friend" and that "conditions may not always be as they seem."

But tell that to the friends and families of people who have died. They don't believe the state should just give up.

They haven't.

On Kauai, money from the online fundraisers put into motion by Zimmerman and Schlossman is going to the nonprofit [Kauai Lifeguard Association](#), which uses it for equipment and other lifeguard needs.

And they're not alone; similar fundraising efforts happen on each island after drownings and other accidental deaths.



Lifeguards teach students about ocean safety at Makaha Elementary School on Oahu.

KLA Vice President Jim Jung said hundreds of thousands of dollars have been raised to help support ocean safety programs since the nonprofit was founded in 2005.

Jung has worked for years to educate visitors and locals alike about ocean safety, from speaking to elementary school kids to helping hotel concierges understand particular hazards in certain areas and where to steer tourists.

The KLA funds have supported a junior lifeguard program, all-terrain vehicles and watercraft for lifeguards and other programs.

But for all the success the nonprofit has had in raising money and redirecting it, Jung said, he still deals with the reality of not being able to afford things like setting up a new lifeguard tower.

That could change if political and community leaders would realize that keeping visitors safe — and shifting more money to the issue — would also help boost the tourism business.

"We tax the hell out of our visitors," Jung said. "We should use a lot more of that money to help protect them. It seems like a moral obligation."

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