

Transcript:

Black Kinship Families

The High Cost of Loving

Announcer:

Black Kinship Families and the High Cost of Loving: A conversation with Karyne Jones, President and CEO of NCBA, the National Caucus and Center on Black Aging, Incorporated. NCBA is a proud partner of the Grandfamilies & Kinship Support Network.

In separate conversations, Karyne speaks with three grandparents who are rearing their children's children.

First, Rhodena Arnold, who holds a full-time job and is rearing her grandson and two of her late sister's children in Chicago, Illinois.

Karyne Jones:

Ms. Arnold, we're just so glad that you joined us today to tell us your story. Let me just ask you, how did you become a grandparent in custodial responsibility of your grandson and your other two niece and nephews?

Rhodena Arnold:

I became guardianship with my grandson because his mom passed in 2011 in a car accident. Therefore, I had to take over and be his guardian. My nephew and niece, same thing. My sister passed, my mother passed, so I had to step in and take guardianship over my nephew and niece.

Karyne Jones:

Their ages?

Rhodena Arnold:

Armani is 15, Jamiah is 17 and Erin is 11.

Karyne Jones:

So, you got a house full.

Rhodena Arnold:

Yes.

Karyne Jones:

My goodness. Well, listen. How has the transition been?

Rhodena Arnold:

Well, with the nephew and niece, it has been a lot. It's not easy. It's not easy because they have behavior issues. It's not easy for me because I'm a working grandmother. I don't have the days to constantly take off work. I don't have the funds for the therapy that they need.

Everything that I do, I've tried to get help with them from the government, but they won't help me. They go off of my income for these children. So, they won't give me LINK [state-issued debit card for a variety of social services], so I have to spend cash. They don't give me ... What is it called? Not the SNAP [Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program], but the money with the food stamps. I don't get that. Everything has to be done off of my income.

It's an enjoyment, but sometimes it can be very overwhelming, because I don't get the support that I need. Like as far as transportation, they won't give me transportation for them. I have to pay for that. I have to pay Ubers every day.

I feel, as a grandparent who has reached out to government assistance, I just feel that when we grandparents have to take on the responsibility of raising, say, kinship, I think that the government should help us a little bit, not a whole lot, but some type of way financially to help take care of these kids.

Karyne Jones:

Yeah. You would think they would, Ms. Arnold, because if you didn't then they'd be put into a foster care situation which would cost even more. We all know that they do so much better in a relative, or someone that they know, their home, and particularly one that I know is filled with love with you, they do so much better.

Have you sought ... What, in particular, have you sought assistance on? I know you just mentioned transportation. Are you eligible for any kind of food stamps?

Rhodena Arnold:

Yeah. Denied. Each time I apply: denied. I asked for transportation, denied. Everything that I apply for is denied. They say I make a lot of money. To me, I don't make a lot of money. What I make is enough for me. It's not for three extra kids that the government would not help me with.

I was told have I ever thought about foster parent or let them go into DCFS [Illinois Department of Children and Family Services] and then then try to go back and get them. I said, "No. I'm not allowing them to go into DCFS." They wanted me to put them in DCFS and then try to go back and get them, so I can get some funds to help take care of them, but I wouldn't do that.

Karyne Jones:

Yeah. That would make it hard for them.

Rhodena Arnold:

Yes.

Karyne Jones:

Make it even more difficult. Do you have legal custody of them?

Rhodena Arnold:

Yes, all three of them.

Karyne Jones:

What would be your recommendation that we can take to our partnerships on how we can improve not only the way it's set up, because obviously the people you're dealing with are only following the rules that are set in place by law or by policy or what have you.

Let me just ask you first, before I do that, how were you treated by the people that you tried to get this assistance from?

Rhodena Arnold:

When I kept going back and forth asking them or asking why was I denied, that's what they told me, that, "Well, maybe you should become a foster parent, or maybe you should put them in DCFS." That's not a solution.

I think that for grandparents ... We also have grandparents that's on a fixed income. It's just that, a fixed income. It's not to take care of others. Like I say, I don't have a whole

lot of money. It's three, not one, not two. It's three of them. Like I say, I don't feel that ... What I'm asking for them should not be based on my income. It shouldn't be based on my income.

Karyne Jones:

Particularly the therapy.

Rhodena Arnold:

Huh?

Karyne Jones:

Particularly the therapy.

Rhodena Arnold:

Uh-huh. If they were in foster care or DCFS, then you all would want to help me. It shouldn't be that way. Why not help me?

Karyne Jones:

Mm-hmm. Yeah. Of course, we know why you wouldn't want to go through the foster parenting thing. Would there be a guarantee that if you even went that route that you'd get the kids back?

Rhodena Arnold:

Who knows?

Karyne Jones:

Who knows? So, it's traumatic for them, in terms of any kind of transition, but then it would be traumatic for you, because even though ... You shouldn't have to go through a process ... Well, I don't want to get too into that.

These are the kinds of things that we're trying to help these agencies and organizations that specifically deal with grandfamilies, as they're being called.

So, we're trying to really get families that we know are in your same situation to understand that there is assistance for them. But as you just mentioned, these are the kinds of things that, if they're going to go and get assistance, what obstacles they're going to face, and how can we now try to change that so it makes it a little easier, and that we can keep these families together. You have any other recommendations or things that...

Rhodena Arnold:

I do, because also with afterschool programs ... Well, here in Chicago, you have to pay for everything. Nothing is free. I even asked for ... What is it? A grant to help pay for them to be able to go to the YMCA to do basketball, swimming, get tutoring, whatever. Denied. I will have to pay for that too.

Karyne Jones:

I'm so sorry that you've had such a difficult time but let me tell you how much I admire you for what you're doing. You're very special. But there's so many special people like you out here who we really want to try to reach, and who we really want to try to help and change your situation so that those that do have to take on these responsibilities get as much assistance and guidance and support as they possibly can.

That's why we're working with this program, this technical center, so that you will have ... The people that are running these organizations will be able then to know how to help families like yours. Are you able to get any other community support, church support, social services, any other support?

Rhodena Arnold:

No.

Karyne Jones:

No. I'm sure you've tried because you sound like you've been very resourceful.

Rhodena Arnold:

I have. What they did do, they did give me medical for them. They did give me medical county care for them. I don't pay for medical for them.

Karyne Jones:

Well, that's good, but then that's the extent of the support that you're getting?

Rhodena Arnold:

Yes.

Karyne Jones:

Because everything is based on your income that was intended for you and not for four people.

Rhodena Arnold:

Yeah.

Karyne Jones:

Yeah. And kids who still, even though they understand the situation, still want the same thing as every other kid. I do understand.

I don't really have any other questions of you. I just want to tell you again how much I admire you. Every time we speak to a grandmother or a grandfather who has taken on this responsibility ...

Again, it's not unique to our community, because it's what we do. We step up and we take care of our family because we love our family members. But it does bring on a lot of challenges and things that we hadn't planned on in this time of our lives, as we've gotten older. We've raised our own kids, and then we're just repeating that same thing.

But I just want to tell you how much I do admire you, and let you know that we're doing everything we can to try to develop policies and to make recommendations on legislation that will help and support grandfamilies and kinship families as they take on these roles.

We need advocates like you to be able to speak to us so that people understand, as you have a personal and individual input that could make a real difference. Just by your participating and helping us with this project, I appreciate you so much. Thank you, Ms. Arnold, for coming on and being our guest today.

Rhodena Arnold:

Thanks for having me.

Announcer:

Rod Johnson also has a full-time job, and with his wife, is rearing two of their grandsons in Orlando, Florida.

Karyne Jones:

I understand that you and your wife have helped raise two of your six grandchildren, starting from age three and four. How did that come to pass?

Rod Johnson:

My son fell on a little hard time there. Me and his mother had to step in and help him and his girlfriend. Unfortunately, sometime the world grabs you and treat you in a certain way that you need help from your parents. It's a pride thing, but it's for the best of the children. We just took the bull by the horn. That's what we had to do to, through grace of God.

Karyne Jones:

Have you ever engaged with the court system for legal custody, or worked with any child welfare organizations or anything, to assist you with your grandchildren?

Rod Johnson:

Yes. We had to do temporary custody because apparently his girlfriend was going through a few things, like we all do. We got challenges in life. We had to go get temporary custody of our two grand boys and raised them through that.

The DCF [Florida Department of Children and Families] was pretty helpful, but it's hard to explain to them, when they're not there, what we go through to raise these kids. Relaying that to them, sometimes it falls on deaf ears, sometimes they listen. That's always a challenge.

Karyne Jones:

So, you found some difficulty, but ultimately, I hope that they were able help you in some ways.

Rod Johnson:

Yes. They made sure ... the routine things, made sure that the kids was well taken care of, which me and my wife did a great job, through the grace of God.

Far as, like I say, in a African American household, it's different. It's different. Like I said, it's hard for them to understand, if they're not African American, been through some of these things, and the challenges that we face raising these kids. It's different. It's a whole different ballgame.

Karyne Jones:

It is. You hear the term cultural competency, and the terms that they throw around within the whole social service network. But that really goes beyond that in terms of just really trying to understand the culture of African Americans, and how we raise our children and what we do for them.

Again, it is not a question of if, but when we have to do it, we do it with gusto. We do whatever we can to help our children. I know you just probably had to teach some of the people that you came in contact with on what actually you needed to help make these children's lives successful.

Rod Johnson:

Yes. Like I said before, it's hard to explain to them what goes on, because that's one of the problems now. We have to get back to our roots, the way we used to raise kids. That's what a lot is lacking. Let us do our jobs as well. It's okay to get involved and try to help us, but they got to let us do our job too. Especially being a Black father of four sons, you got to let us do our job. You got to let us do our job.

Karyne Jones:

Because we have to raise them differently to deal with the world that does not maybe accept us the way that we would hope they would treat us. We have to raise our children to always be aware, and to understand their place in this society. You're absolutely right. Let you raise your children the way you know they can survive and be most successful.

Rod Johnson:

Like I tell them, we have to groom them to become chameleons so they can adapt to their environment. That's what I taught my sons. You got to be a chameleon. Sometimes you have to swallow your pride. Sometimes you have to stand up. But it don't make you less than a man. I raised my boys to be chameleons. Adapt to your environment and you'll survive. You'll survive. But they got to let us continue to teach them that well and not intervene, and being so broad as if we tell them one thing this way, they'll turn out this way, when I've been a young man on the streets myself. So, it's like I said. They want to get involved, but they don't understand the full picture.

Karyne Jones:

That's why we need people like you, and that's why we're doing this kind of research to actually talk to people who are having to deal in these situations, so that we can share this information with not only members of the court system but also social service organizations, to make them understand that in America we do have to raise our children in a way that they can survive. So, I do appreciate those comments.

Let me ask, have you got any other help from any other organizations with the assistance with your grandchildren?

Rod Johnson:

No. No. Nope.

Karyne Jones:

The church?

Rod Johnson:

No, didn't reach out that way. I just did a lot of praying, and doing what my father taught me to do to try to raise my two grand boys, help raise them, and make sure they understand God first and then respect their parents. You know, that's the ground base we need to get back to. We really need to get back to that. Respect your parents and God. Yes.

Karyne Jones:

Let me ask you, have you ever heard of the term grandfamily?

Rod Johnson:

No, never heard of that.

Karyne Jones:

Kinship family?

Rod Johnson:

What they say now?

Karyne Jones:

Kinship family.

Rod Johnson:

No.

Karyne Jones:

Those are the terms that are used in describing families that have assumed guardianship over their grandchildren or relatives, younger relatives.

Rod Johnson:

Got you.

Karyne Jones:

And so, if there was a program that said grandfamilies, and they're there to assist you, you might not know that that's there to help you, because you're not familiar with the term. One of the things we're trying to do is to make sure we get as much information, education, and awareness out there that there are some programs in different areas that are specifically designed to assist and provide technical assistance to families who are in situations that you're in. So, we need the help of people like you and others to know, number one, to even recognize what a grandfamily is and what a kinship family is.

Rod Johnson:

Right.

Karyne Jones:

I hope that if you do see any of those in your area, that you will know that they're designed to assist you.

Rod Johnson:

Well, you would think that if DCF and different organizations like that, that would be part of their whole package. That would be priority one. "Hey. We got assistance from different programs to help you and whoever's helped taking care of the kids," or whatnot. That's a very good educational point to teach the grandparents that, that you're not alone, you need help. But at the same time, still let us do our job. Education is good for us, telling us what we need to do. But raising a young African American man is a challenge. It's a challenge. It's a challenge.

Karyne Jones:

Yeah. Well, I'm not quite sure it's the job of these organizations to tell you how to raise your children. I think it's their job to assist you in any way that they can to help you in that process, but not get so far into the weeds that it micromanages that. And so, what they're there to do is to let you know about special programs, provide support networks, direct you in the way where you might get extra tutoring, or if the child needs some special maybe mental issue. That's the direction that they should be there to provide you with direction on where you can get assistance specific to your needs. Not necessarily come in and tell you how to raise your children.

Rod Johnson:

And you're absolutely right. That's what they should be doing. But you know the case. That's not what's happening. Because I've been through it.

Karyne Jones:

Yeah. Well, we're trying to change that. That's why we're doing this kind of study, so that we can get this information out to those policymakers who make the rules up and do the funding and what have you, and also to the workers who have the direct contact with these families, families like yours, to make them understand what's really needed to help these families in this process.

We're finding that African Americans are particularly uneasy about working with some of these agencies, and particularly the courts and even some specific social workers. You sort of mentioned that, but any suggestions? Or maybe talk about maybe a difficult time you may have had, or maybe an easy time that you might have had that you'd like to share?

Rod Johnson:

Yeah. For example, one of my sons got himself in a little situation. It's all back to, like I say, we need to get back to our roots of raising our kids the way we used to, and they need to let us.

One of the situations one of my sons got himself in trouble. He went to college and everything. It's funny that I went to bail him out of jail, and when the bail bondsman went to get him, he said, "Who came and got me?" He said, "Your dad waiting at the office." He said, "Leave me in here, because I'm afraid of the disappointment he going to see in me."

You see? I always instilled in my sons the biggest thing he could do is disappoint me. Some people say, well, that's being mental abused or whatever, but no. What you want me to do? Beat him? Threaten him? What you want me to do? When the courts get involved, they just muddy the water. That's why African Americans back away from that situation. Let us do our job. And if we need help, we'll reach out and cry for you. But when we do, we need them to listen.

Karyne Jones:

What about with social workers and agency workers and all of those?

Rod Johnson:

I had a social worker or two come by when I was dealing with my grandson's situation. It not the way I used to be when I was growing up. They're there. They not in tune. Now I did have a young White lady come. She was somewhat a social worker, but she didn't do anything. She was there more to smile, look and walk away. But then I got an African American woman took over the whole situation. That's a whole different thing. She understood what had to happen and what needed to happen.

It's a big culture gap there, how we raise our kids and things like that, where they need to let us do our job, and we get back to the roots of having that strong family, that Big Mama, that Papa.

Karyne Jones:

Yes.

Rod Johnson:

So, they just need to let us do our job. It starts with the grandparents because we set the foundation for this generation here. We kind of lost our way too. Like I said, I got six grandkids and just them three constant I have to help raise. But you know what though? It's a blessing. I wouldn't change it for nothing in the world.

Karyne Jones:

Sure it is. Sure it is. Absolutely. That's still part of your legacy. Absolutely. Absolutely. Well, I'm going to close out now, but I wanted to ask you, we're really here to try to help other grandparents like yourself who are going through the second round of child rearing. Give us some suggestions that we can share with them that will help them maybe to even utilize more services, not be so turned away, but to really take advantage of maybe some of the programs that are out there designed to assist them. Any suggestions to other grandparents?

Rod Johnson:

They have to put their pride aside. It's not about them. It's going to be more about the kids. If there is assistance out there, they just need to either be educated or educate themselves and realize that they're not alone.

Sometimes African American families, if you ain't got nothing to eat in the house or need assistance, we make ends meet. But it's a lot of programs out there that we do need to be educated on and educate ourselves, and swallow our pride a little bit, and carry that load for the kids. That's all we can do. That's all we really can do, educate ourselves and get educated, and don't be afraid to ask for help, and not be so prideful.

Announcer:

Finally, Shirley Littlejohn of Capital Heights, Maryland, now retired and having already reared three grandchildren, she's currently rearing three great-grandchildren.

Karyne Jones:

How does it feel to be a caregiver or provider at this point in your life?

Shirley Littlejohn:

Let me go back a little bit. When I retired from the government, I was going to go in a senior citizen place. I was going to travel and do this and do that. Circumstances changed. I was determined, "I'm not going to do this. I am not rearing any more children. I'm not doing it."

But I don't know. God kept tearing at my heart and tearing at my heart. I just had to give in. I just could not let them be out there like that. So, I said, "Okay, Shirley. You got to give it up. You gotta give it up." So, I went on and took them in. I didn't think that I would be rearing the great grands, because at the time, the mother was still living, even though I was still providing and helping with them. But those circumstances changed.

I didn't feel comfortable with them living with their father or anything like that, because he wasn't that stable. So then talked to my granddaughter; had a long conversation. I did tell her that I would be their caregiver, but I would have to do this legally. She understood. She said she didn't mind. If I didn't mind, she didn't mind. She didn't want me to because of my age, but I just couldn't leave them out there like that. So now, this is where I am. They are really blossoming. They are really doing good in school. They're on the honor roll. They keep me young, I must admit.

Karyne Jones:

Well, of course they do. The one good thing is you're very experienced now.

Shirley Littlejohn:

Yes, exactly.

Karyne Jones:

Well, as I said, it's always special, but it is not unique to our community. One of the things that we do is, as we take on the responsibility of our loved ones, it can be a hardship. It's not something that we plan, particularly as we get older, when our income changes and all of those things.

Shirley Littlejohn:

I don't get food stamps, but I do get cash assistance for them. And I really think I need to be getting food stamps too. But, you know, I just work it out best I can.

I have a village around me that's very helpful, my daughters, family, and friends from church. I don't call on them as much as I ... no, I won't say I should. But if I need them, I know I can call on them. They have been very helpful to me, certain ones, but I try not to. So, it's been pretty rough, but I've found a way. I do thank God that I do have help, with my daughter, especially my daughters help me out a lot.

Karyne Jones:

We've always believed it takes a village. That's why I know some of your church members help you and contribute, and other families and friends, but there are sources in there that can help you beyond that. That's why these kinds of conversations are important, for them to hear your story and the challenges that you are going through, and then for us to be able to share this so that others will know.

Why do you think so many African Americans in particular, or people of color, don't take advantage of the programs and the assistance that's out there or provided for them?

Shirley Littlejohn:

Well, I guess pride sometimes kind of gets in the way. It doesn't bother me, because if I need help, I'm going to try to seek it out. A lot of people want to try to do it on their own, and don't want to go to these different services. Because sometimes those agencies are really rough on Black ... especially Black women. They tend to look down. Well, that's my feeling, that they tend to look down on me, and talk so mean to you.

But I found that you could say whatever you want to say. If need some help, that's what you're there for is to help me. I've learned how to talk to people so that they'll know that I am serious about what I'm trying to do. If you help me, then maybe I won't have to keep running back to you.

But I think a lot of people ... I have sat in social services and just listened to some of the conversations. It's really sad. It's really sad that they have to go through what you have to go through to try to get some help for. That's what you're out there for.

Karyne Jones:

Yeah. It's almost as if they take on an attitude that isn't necessary. The reason they're in those positions is to help people. One way you help people is, number one, welcome them and say, "We understand. That's why we're here, to assist you. Now how can we assist you?"

Shirley Littlejohn:

Exactly.

Karyne Jones:

And that then would then allow people then to get rid of that pride or whatever it is and say, "Well, this is where I need help." Again, that's one of the things we're trying to address is that the people at these agencies that are working to provide these programs

and give information about assistance, that it's the way they treat people is why some people don't take advantage of it. You just gave a really good example of that. It's good to hear it from your mouth and not those of us who are just assuming that that's the way it is.

Shirley Littlejohn:

Right, exactly.

Karyne Jones:

Well, that's wonderful. Have you had to go through any of the formal institutions, like the foster care system, or the guardianship process, or what have you? How was that if you had to be involved?

Shirley Littlejohn:

I had to do ... Because like I said, I wanted to get legal custody. When I first got the first child, she was about three or four. My granddaughter was out there in the streets. It wasn't a good environment for her. So, we talked, and I went through ... I think went through ... somebody ... I was recommended through Catholic Charities to get help with getting legal custody of her. Then when she passed, I was recommended to a law firm in Maryland. And I went through the law firm to get legal custody of the other two of them. And it was okay. It was okay. It wasn't as bad as I thought it would be. Very, very helpful. I did get legal custody of all three of them.

Karyne Jones:

And that makes a difference.

Shirley Littlejohn:

Right.

Karyne Jones:

It makes a difference. You're doing something for your family. The process should be very simple. Unfortunately, a lot of our folks don't know where to turn, where to get the information. Again, this is why we're trying to reach out and make more awareness to these things are possible.

Because again, traditionally, in our community, we just take you in and we go from there. But with things changing so, with technology, with all of the things ensuring that everything's legal or what have you, things have changed. And so, it's not like it used to be back in the day. You really have to have all of these legal papers and stuff to go with them. I'm glad that experience was good for you.

Shirley Littlejohn:

Yes, it was.

Karyne Jones:

We already know that ... It wasn't even a question. You just answered it and I didn't even have to ask, "Why did you take this course of action?" Well, you just said these are your babies.

Shirley Littlejohn:

Yes.

Karyne Jones:

You wanted them to have a better environment and stuff. That is admirable, very admirable, Ms. Littlejohn, so I know.

Are there any other difficulties that you may have experienced in your role as the legal guardian and with your grandchildren in the system? Have there been any other issues?

Shirley Littlejohn:

Not that I can say right off. When things do ... because once a year, you have to re-certify for the TCA [Maryland's Temporary Cash Assistance program], and you have to re-certify for the medical insurance and stuff like that. I try to keep up with that. But all in all, it's been pretty good.

I've ran across some very nice people in those agencies, but just like I said, just listening to us, how some of the people talk to some people, it's really sad. But all in all, I've been doing pretty good. Whenever I do go back for a meeting or anything like that, I don't have too much of a problem. It's just the waiting time. But it's been pretty good.

Karyne Jones:

Well, it's probably been pretty good for you because you're intelligent enough to know what to do. My heart goes out to those that just have no understanding or no awareness. We find, a lot of times, that people don't even know what the term grandfamilies even means.

Shirley Littlejohn:

Exactly. I had never heard of grandfamily before, until now. I really hadn't.

Karyne Jones:

Again, we're trying to raise the awareness, because we know, we know that there are more grandparents and kinship—kinship being aunts, uncles, what have you; close friends, that have taken in young children...

Shirley Littlejohn:

Exactly.

Karyne Jones:

... and they have no idea. So, if you don't self-identify with the term grandfamilies, how do you know then to seek services under a grandfamilies program?

Shirley Littlejohn:

Exactly, exactly.

Karyne Jones:

That's what we're trying to change. We're trying to get that education and that awareness out to our community.

Shirley Littlejohn:

That's really wonderful.

Karyne Jones:

Make that change. We're trying to do that.

Shirley Littlejohn:

It's really needed. It's good to have those agencies out there, but if you don't know about them then, you can't.

Karyne Jones:

Well, thank you so much. I appreciate you sharing so much of your personal story. We obviously are pushing for it. We will, obviously, be back in touch with you, because I think your story is something that many, many other people need to hear, so that they can provide better services, better communication.

Obviously, as they learn how to communicate and to work better in our community, then our community then can begin to take more advantage of these programs and services that are available for them.

Shirley Littlejohn:

Exactly. Yeah.

Karyne Jones:

So, thank you so much, Ms. Littlejohn. God bless you.

Shirley Littlejohn:

You too.

Karyne Jones:

I don't have to say take care of those babies. Like I said, you've got experience. Thank you so much.

Shirley Littlejohn:

They keep me on my toes, I tell you, but you know ...

Karyne Jones:

Great. That's great. Well, thank you.

Announcer:

Additional resources are available at the Grandfamilies & Kinship Support Network website, that's gksnetwork.org, and at the website of Generations United, gu.org.

The Grandfamilies & Kinship Support Network: A National Technical Assistance Center (Network) helps government agencies and nonprofits in states, tribes, and territories work across jurisdictional and systemic boundaries to improve supports and services for families in which grandparents, other relatives, or close family friends are raising children whose parents are unable to do so. For more information, please visit www.GKSNetwork.org.

The Network is supported by the Administration for Community Living (ACL), U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) as part of a financial assistance award totaling \$9,950,000 with 95 percentage funded by ACL/HHS and \$523,684 and 5 percentage funded by non-government sources. The contents are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official views of, nor an endorsement, by ACL/HHS, or the U.S. Government.

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