Accessible Version

June 3, 2024

The Honorable Adrianne Todman
Acting Secretary
U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development
451 7th Street, SW
Washington, DC 20410

Priority Open Recommendations: Department of Housing and Urban Development

Dear Madam Acting Secretary:

The purpose of this letter is to provide an update on the overall status of the Department of Housing and Urban Development's (HUD) implementation of GAO's recommendations and to call your personal attention to areas where open recommendations should be given high priority.[1] In November 2023, we reported that, on a government-wide basis, 75 percent of our recommendations made 4 years ago were implemented.[2] HUD's recommendation implementation rate was 74 percent. As of May 2024, HUD had 92 open recommendations. Fully implementing these open recommendations could significantly improve agency operations.

In our May 2023 letter, we noted that 11 of our open recommendations were priority recommendations. Since that time, HUD implemented two of these recommendations and we closed one recommendation as no longer valid.[3]

- In September 2023, HUD issued guidance on roles and responsibilities when engaging with public housing agencies to help them comply with the Lead Safe Housing Rule. This guidance implements two of our recommendations. First, it establishes a plan for monitoring public housing agencies' compliance with lead paint regulations and describes the roles and responsibilities within HUD for coordinating its oversight and engaging with public housing agencies. Second, the guidance establishes procedures to address noncompliance with

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[1]Priority recommendations are those that GAO believes warrant priority attention from heads of key departments or agencies. They are highlighted because, upon implementation, they may significantly improve government operations, for example, by realizing large dollar savings; eliminating mismanagement, fraud, and abuse; or making progress toward addressing a high-risk or duplication issue.

[2]GAO, *Performance and Accountability Report: Fiscal Year 2023*, GAO-24-900483 (Washington, D.C.: Nov. 15, 2023).

[3]We closed our March 2019 recommendation for the Real Estate Assessment Center to conduct a comprehensive review of its physical inspection process because the process in question is no longer in use. In 2023, HUD implemented a new inspection process. GAO, *Real Estate Assessment Center: HUD Should Improve Physical Inspection Process and Oversight of Inspectors*, GAO-19-254 (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 21, 2019).

lead paint regulations. This strengthens HUD's oversight of public housing agencies' compliance with lead paint regulations.[4]

We ask that you direct your attention to the remaining eight open priority recommendations. We also are adding three new recommendations as priorities this year, related to reducing fraud risk in the Community Development Block Grant Disaster Recovery (CDBG-DR) grant program. This brings the total number of priority recommendations to 11. (See the Enclosure for the list of recommendations.)

The 11 priority recommendations fall into the following five areas:

Reducing fraud risk in federal funding for disaster recovery. In response to a historic string of natural disasters in the United States, Congress appropriated about $39.5 billion in CDBG-DR grant funds from 2017 through 2019. CDBG-DR is vulnerable to numerous fraud risks, including grantee, contractor, and applicant fraud. Thus, we made three recommendations to HUD. These include to (1) identify ways to collect and combine contractor and subcontractor data across grantees and subrecipients to facilitate risk analyses and (2) develop and implement guidance to grant recipients to facilitate identification of contractor and cross-cutting fraud risks. By implementing these recommendations, HUD and grantees could better understand the risk environment for grants and help support the ability of grantees and subrecipients to determine contractor eligibility.

We also recommended that HUD comprehensively assess CDBG-DR for fraud risk. By doing so, HUD could better understand the wide-ranging fraud risks facing CDBG-DR and its grantees and prevent potential fraud, waste, and abuse.

Addressing challenges in federal disaster recovery efforts. Each year, the federal government provides billions of dollars to support community recovery after natural disasters. In fiscal years 2022 and 2023, we made four recommendations to HUD to address challenges affecting such efforts. They include (1) developing and implementing an interagency plan to identify barriers to accessing disaster recovery assistance and (2) coordinating with other federal agencies to design and establish processes to be used in and across federal disaster recovery programs to address those identified access barriers and disparate outcomes. In addition, we recommended that HUD better manage fragmentation between its disaster recovery programs and other federal programs. Implementing these recommendations could improve service delivery to disaster survivors and communities, improve the effectiveness of recovery efforts, and reduce federal fiscal exposure.

We also recommended that HUD require CDBG-DR grantees to collect and analyze data needed to monitor the timeliness of housing activities and inform corrective actions. By doing so, HUD could better ensure that grantees identify problem areas and take corrective actions.

Improving data collection on homelessness. Counting the homeless population is a longstanding challenge. In June 2020, we recommended that HUD (1) conduct quality assurance checks on data-collection methodologies for the Point-in-Time count submissions and (2) assess and enhance the assistance it provides on data collection. By strengthening its oversight and guidance in these two areas, HUD could further improve the quality of data on homelessness.

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[4]GAO, *Lead Paint in Housing: HUD Should Strengthen Grant Processes, Compliance Monitoring, and Performance Assessment*, GAO-18-394 (Washington, D.C.: June 19, 2018).

Addressing cybersecurity challenges. The protection of personally identifiable information—such as birth dates and Social Security numbers is a significant issue. In September 2022, we recommended that HUD incorporate privacy into an organization-wide risk-management strategy that includes a determination of risk tolerance. Doing so would give HUD greater assurance that it will manage privacy risks within acceptable thresholds.

Improving IT management. HUD has long experienced shortcomings in its IT management capability and limitations in the IT systems supporting its mission. Specifically, HUD's systems are antiquated and costly-to-maintain. In addition, HUD has reported its systems are overlapping, duplicative, and not integrated, necessitating manual workarounds. We also have reported on the need for HUD to improve its IT management controls. In December 2014, we recommended that HUD develop a process to enable the agency to identify IT governance actions and projects that achieve cost savings and operational efficiencies. Implementing this recommendation would improve HUD's ability to monitor the outcomes of its IT governance activities and achieve potential cost savings and operational efficiencies.

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In April 2023, we issued our biennial update to our High-Risk List, which identifies government operations with greater vulnerabilities to fraud, waste, abuse, and mismanagement or the need for transformation to address economy, efficiency, or effectiveness challenges.[5] One of our high-risk areas—resolving the federal role in housing finance—relates directly to HUD.

Several other government-wide high-risk areas also have direct implications for HUD and its operations. These include (1) improving the management of IT acquisitions and operations, (2) improving strategic human capital management, (3) managing federal real property, (4) ensuring the cybersecurity of the nation, and (5) managing the government-wide personnel security clearance process.

In addition to HUD's high-risk area, we urge your attention to resolving these other government-wide high-risk issues as they relate to HUD. Progress on high-risk issues has been possible through the concerted actions and efforts of Congress, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), and the leadership and staff in agencies, including within HUD. In March 2022, we issued a report on key practices to successfully address high-risk areas, which can be a helpful resource as your agency continues to make progress to address high-risk issues.[6]

We also recognize the key role Congress plays in providing oversight and maintaining focus on our recommendations to ensure they are implemented and produce their desired results. Legislation enacted in December 2022 includes a provision for GAO to identify any additional congressional oversight actions that can help agencies implement priority recommendations and address any underlying issues relating to such implementation.[7]

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[5]GAO, *High-Risk Series: Efforts Made to Achieve Progress Need to Be Maintained and Expanded to Fully Address All Areas*, GAO-23-106203 (Washington, D.C.: Apr. 20, 2023).

[6]GAO, *High-Risk Series: Key Practices to Successfully Address High-Risk Areas and Remove Them from the List*, GAO-22-105184 (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 3, 2022).

[7]James M. Inhofe National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2023, Pub. L. No. 117-263, § 7211(a)(2), 136 Stat. 2395, 3668 (2022); H.R. Rep. No. 117-389 (2022) (accompanying Legislative Branch Appropriations Act, H.R. 8237, 117th Cong. (2022)).

Congress can use various strategies to address our recommendations, such as incorporating them into legislation. Congress also can use its budget, appropriations, and oversight processes to incentivize executive branch agencies to act on our recommendations and monitor their progress. For example, Congress can hold hearings focused on HUD's progress in implementing GAO's priority recommendations, withhold funds when appropriate, or take other actions to provide incentives for agencies to act. Moreover, Congress can follow up during the appropriations process and request periodic updates.

Congress also plays a key role in addressing any underlying issues related to the implementation of these recommendations. For example, Congress can pass legislation providing an agency explicit authority to implement a recommendation or requiring an agency to take certain actions to implement a recommendation.

Copies of this report are being sent to the Director of OMB and the appropriate congressional committees. In addition, the report will be available on the GAO website at Priority Open Recommendation Letters | U.S. GAO.

I appreciate HUD's continued commitment to these important issues. If you have any questions or would like to discuss any of the issues outlined in this letter, please do not hesitate to contact me or Daniel Garcia-Diaz, Managing Director, Financial Markets and Community Investment, at garciadiazd@gao.gov or (202) 512-8678. Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last page of this report. Our teams will continue to coordinate with your staff on all of the 92 open recommendations, as well as those additional recommendations in the high-risk areas for which HUD has a leading role. Thank you for your attention to these matters.

Sincerely,

Gene L. Dodaro
Comptroller General
of the United States

Enclosure - 1

cc: Marion McFadden, Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary, Office of Community Planning and Development
Claudette Fernandez, General Deputy Assistant Secretary, Office of Community Planning and Development
Jemine A. Bryon, Deputy Assistant Secretary, Office of Special Needs and Assistance Programs
Claudia Monterrosa, Deputy Assistant Secretary, Grant Programs

Ryan Lafollette, Acting Deputy Assistant Secretary, Real Estate Assessment Center
Richard J. Monocchio, Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary, Office of Public and Indian Housing
Matthew E. Ammon, Director, Office of Lead Hazard Control and Healthy Homes
Beth Niblock, Chief Information Officer, Office of the Chief Information Officer
Sairah Ijaz, Deputy Chief Information Officer, Office of the Chief Information Officer
Vinay Singh, Chief Financial Officer, Office of the Chief Financial Officer
The Honorable Shalanda Young, Director, Office of Management and Budget

Enclosure

Priority Open Recommendations to Department of Housing and Urban Development

Reducing Fraud Risk in Federal Funding for Disaster Recovery

Disaster Recovery: HUD Should Develop Data Collection Guidance to Support Analysis of Block Grant Fraud Risks. GAO-23-104382. Washington, D.C.: August 17, 2023.

Year Recommendations Made: 2023

Recommendation: The Assistant Secretary for Community Planning and Development should identify ways to collect and combine contractor and subcontractor data across grantees and subrecipients to facilitate risk analyses, such as by expanding the Disaster Recovery Data Portal, Disaster Recovery Grant Reporting System, or other appropriate systems.

Actions Needed: The Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) neither agreed nor disagreed with this recommendation. In its report comments, HUD stated it was taking steps to improve its fraud risk assessment and annual grantee risk analysis. As of February 2024, HUD officials told GAO it planned to develop and implement fraud analytics but did not provide a time frame for completion.

To fully implement this recommendation, HUD must determine how to collect and use contractor and subcontractor data to facilitate risk analysis. With complete and consistent data across Community Development Block Grant Disaster Recovery (CDBG-DR) grantees and subrecipients, HUD and its grantees would be better positioned to identify eligibility and fraud risks.

Recommendation: The Assistant Secretary for Community Planning and Development should develop and implement guidance for CDBG-DR grantees and subrecipients to collect contractor and subcontractor data to facilitate identification of contractor and cross-cutting fraud risks through approaches such as network analysis.

Actions Needed: HUD disagreed with this recommendation. In its report comments, HUD stated grantees are not required to take specific actions (such as collecting contractor data) to support fraud risk management. However, HUD—which has an oversight role for both CDBG-DR and its grantees—is best positioned to use such data to identify and assess contractor and cross-cutting risks. As of February 2024, HUD officials told GAO it planned to develop and implement fraud analytics. To fully implement this recommendation, HUD must develop and implement guidance for its CDBG-DR grantees and subrecipients on such data collection. With these data, HUD would be able to better identify areas of increased fraud and program delivery risk.

Director: Rebecca Shea
Contact Information: shear@gao.gov, (202) 512-6722

Disaster Recovery: HUD Should Take Additional Action to Assess Community Development Block Grant Fraud Risks. GAO-21-177. Washington, D.C.: May 5, 2021.

Year Recommendation Made: 2021

Recommendation: The Assistant Secretary for Community Planning and Development should comprehensively assess fraud risks to CDBG-DR, including identifying inherent fraud risks affecting it, assessing the likelihood and impact of inherent fraud risks, determining fraud risk tolerance, and examining the suitability of existing fraud controls. The assessment should also consider CDBG-DR's risk environment and be informed by the fraud risks identified in this report.

Actions Needed: HUD neither agreed nor disagreed with this recommendation. As of February 2024, HUD stated it completed an agency-wide Front-End Risk Assessment in September 2023, which included fraud-related questions and required HUD to identify fraud risks, assign a likelihood and impact of occurrence, rank risks, and identify mitigation steps. The assessment also noted that HUD should conduct a comprehensive fraud risk assessment of CDBG-DR and pilot fraud risk-management initiatives with grantees. HUD has taken some steps to assess agency-wide fraud, but the September 2023 assessment did not comprehensively assess risks specific to CDBG-DR. HUD also added a fraud category to its annual Risk Profile, but the latest profile (March 2023) did not comprehensively assess fraud risks specific to CDBG-DR.

To fully implement this recommendation, HUD needs to complete a comprehensive assessment of CDBG-DR for fraud risks. Doing so would help HUD better understand the wide-ranging fraud risks the program faces and help prevent potential fraud, waste, and abuse.

Director: Rebecca Shea
Contact Information: shear@gao.gov, (202) 512-6722

Addressing Challenges in Federal Disaster Recovery Efforts

Disaster Recovery: Better Information Is Needed on the Progress of Block Grant Funds. GAO-23-105295. Washington, D.C.: December 15, 2022.

Year Recommendation Made: 2023

Recommendation: The HUD Assistant Secretary for Community Planning and Development should, in the event of future CDBG-DR funding, require recipients to collect and analyze data on critical milestones needed to monitor the timeliness of their housing activities and inform corrective actions, consistent with leading project management practices.

Action Needed: HUD neither agreed nor disagreed with this recommendation. As of February 2024, HUD's Office of Disaster Recovery was evaluating how best to require grantees to develop milestones to identify program delivery bottlenecks and modify recovery programs to ensure they expeditiously met the needs of disaster survivors. HUD also has been evaluating whether incorporating milestones would require new language in the forthcoming Federal Register notice and an update to the Community Planning and Development Monitoring Handbook. To fully implement this recommendation, HUD must require CDBG-DR recipients to maintain reliable data on critical milestones. By doing so, HUD could help grantees identify problem areas and assess the need for corrective actions to improve program efficiency.

Director: Jill Naamane
Contact Information: naamanej@gao.gov, (202) 512-8678

Disaster Recovery: Actions Needed to Improve the Federal Approach. GAO-23-104956.
Washington, D.C.: November 15, 2022.

Year Recommendation Made: 2023

Recommendation: The Secretary of HUD should, in consultation with the Recovery Support
Function Leadership Group, identify and take steps to better manage fragmentation between its
disaster recovery programs and other federal programs, including consideration of the options
identified in GAO-23-104956. If HUD determines that it needs authority for actions that it seeks
to implement, it should request that authority from Congress.

Action Needed: HUD agreed with this recommendation. In March 2024, HUD officials stated
they were continuing to work with federal partners through HUD's role in the National Disaster
Recovery Framework to share data to inform program and funding decisions for disaster
survivor assistance. HUD anticipates concluding the data-sharing efforts in 2024. In addition,
HUD officials told us that HUD and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA)
completed the first round of a Disaster Housing Pilot to help communities assess housing needs
prior to disasters. They anticipate conducting a second round in 2024. In May 2023, officials
also stated that HUD was seeking public input on ways to improve CDBG-DR fund delivery and
working with agency partners to improve the customer experience for survivors.

To fully address this recommendation, HUD will need to demonstrate that it worked with
interagency partners and thoroughly considered available options, identified those HUD intends
to implement, and then took steps to do so. By taking these steps, HUD could improve service
delivery to disaster survivors and communities and could improve the effectiveness of recovery
efforts.

Director: Christopher Currie
Contact Information: curriec@gao.gov, (202) 512-8777

*Disaster Recovery: Additional Actions Needed to Identify and Address Potential Recovery
Barriers.* GAO-22-104039. Washington, D.C.: December 15, 2021.

Year Recommendations Made: 2022

Recommendation: The HUD Assistant Secretary for Community Planning and Development
should, in coordination with the FEMA Administrator and the Small Business Administration
(SBA), develop, with input from key recovery partners, and implement an interagency plan to
help ensure the availability and use of quality information that includes (1) information
requirements, (2) data sources and methods, and (3) strategies for overcoming information
challenges to support federal agencies involved in disaster recovery in identifying access
barriers or disparate outcomes.

Action Needed: HUD neither agreed nor disagreed with this recommendation. As of February
2024, HUD officials told us that HUD, FEMA, and SBA were developing an interagency plan for
data collection, sharing, and analysis to identify potential equity issues and anticipated the plan
would be completed by June 2024. The officials also reported that HUD planned to expand its
data collection on applicants and beneficiaries, starting with groups protected under the Fair

Housing Act. They reported plans to enter into an interagency agreement with FEMA to coordinate data sharing in spring 2024.

To fully address the recommendation, HUD, in coordination with FEMA and SBA, will need to develop and implement an interagency plan that specifies the data needed and sources of and methods for obtaining the data. By working together, the federal agencies with large recovery programs would have opportunities to devise workable approaches to solve information challenges and ensure that disaster survivors have equal opportunity to access recovery programs.

Recommendation: The HUD Assistant Secretary for Community Planning and Development should coordinate with the FEMA Administrator and SBA to design and establish routine processes to be used within and across federal disaster recovery programs to address identified access barriers and disparate outcomes on an ongoing basis.

Action Needed: HUD neither agreed nor disagreed with this recommendation. In December 2022, HUD officials told us they introduced a new fair housing and civil rights assessment and a pilot dashboard designed to help officials understand the demographics of disaster survivors who benefit from CDBG-DR funds. HUD officials said they would use the dashboard to conduct equity analyses to help identify disparate outcomes and planned to share the analyses with FEMA and SBA and convene interagency working groups to address any issues identified. In February 2024, HUD officials told us they were working on an interagency plan that would describe routine processes used to address any equity issues identified. HUD also established an Equity Team in its Office of Disaster Recovery to expand data collection, evaluate CDBG-DR implementation processes and identify improvements, provide technical assistance to grantees, and evaluate quarterly performance reports, according to HUD officials.

To fully implement this recommendation, HUD must complete its effort to implement processes to be used in and across federal recovery programs to address identified access barriers and disparate outcomes on an ongoing basis. Doing so would provide these programs a mechanism with which they can address any potential access barriers or disparate outcomes they might identify, particularly those arising from interaction between or among programs.

Director: Christopher Currie
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Improving Data Collection on Homelessness

Homelessness: Better HUD Oversight of Data Collection Could Improve Estimates of Homeless Population. GAO-20-433. Washington, D.C.: July 14, 2020.

Year Recommendations Made: 2020

Recommendation: HUD's Office of Special Needs Assistance Programs should conduct quality assurance checks on the Point-in-Time (PIT) count methodology data it requires Continuums of Care (CoC) to submit and take actions as appropriate to ensure that HUD's standards for conducting valid and reliable PIT counts are met.

Action Needed: HUD agreed with this recommendation. As of March 2023, HUD updated its guidance to CoCs on the PIT count methodology and responded to CoC questions on

enumeration issues. In 2023, HUD also updated the questions it asks COCs about their submissions. As of February 2024, HUD officials told us they review the responses and methodology submissions to assess the quality of CoCs' data. HUD officials also told us they evaluate CoCs' data submissions for year-to-year variation, assess whether data validation flags were triggered, and consult with CoCs whose submissions raised data quality questions.

To fully implement this recommendation, HUD needs to provide evidence it assessed the quality of the methodology underlying CoC submissions, such as by reviewing for soundness and accuracy. Implementing quality assurance checks for its PIT count methodology data would help ensure the counts do not underestimate the number of persons experiencing homelessness and show fluctuations that do not accurately reflect changes in this population.

Recommendation: HUD's Office of Special Needs Assistance Programs should assess and enhance the usefulness of its assistance to CoCs' data collection efforts.

Action Needed: HUD agreed with this recommendation. In March 2023, HUD officials told us they were developing an outreach strategy to discuss count methodologies with CoCs, answer questions, and determine if additional guidance or assistance was needed. As of February 2024, HUD developed a random sample of CoCs to which it would provide one-on-one outreach and assistance. HUD also conducted consultations between the Office of Special Needs and Assistance Programs and CoCs seeking additional guidance or clarification on count methodologies. Additionally, officials told us they intended to assess their outreach efforts but their ability to fully implement this effort currently was limited because of resource constraints.

To fully implement this recommendation, HUD needs to evaluate the effectiveness of its assistance to CoCs. Doing so would enable HUD to further improve the quality of information collected.

Director: Alicia Puente Cackley
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Addressing Cybersecurity Challenges

Privacy: Dedicated Leadership Can Improve Programs and Address Challenges. GAO-22-105065. Washington, D.C.: September 22, 2022.

Year Recommendation Made: 2022

Recommendation: The Secretary of Housing and Urban Development should incorporate privacy into an organization-wide risk-management strategy that includes a determination of risk tolerance.

Action Needed: HUD disagreed with this recommendation. As of March 2024, officials stated they did not plan to act on this recommendation. In its report comments, HUD stated its Risk Management Council addresses privacy risks at the enterprise level. Although such a council can be an important tool for managing agency risks, it does not replace the need for a documented risk-management strategy in which the agency explicitly frames its approach to privacy risk.

To fully implement this recommendation, HUD needs to develop and implement a risk-management strategy that addresses privacy, including a determination of HUD's risk tolerance. With such a strategy, HUD would have greater assurance that it will manage privacy risks within acceptable thresholds.

High-Risk Area: Ensuring the Cybersecurity of the Nation

Director: Jennifer Franks
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Director: Marisol Cruz Cain
Contact Information: cruzcainm@gao.gov, (202) 512-5017

Improving IT Management

Information Technology: HUD Can Take Additional Actions to Improve Its Governance. GAO-15-56. Washington, D.C.: December 10, 2014.

Year Recommendation Made: 2015

Recommendation: To establish an enterprise-wide view of cost savings and operational efficiencies generated by investments and governance processes, the Secretary of Housing and Urban Development should direct the Deputy Secretary and Chief Information Officer to place a higher priority on identifying governance-related cost savings and efficiencies and establish and institutionalize a process for identifying and tracking comprehensive, high-quality data on savings and efficiencies resulting from IT investments and the IT governance process.

Action Needed: HUD agreed with this recommendation. In November 2022, HUD reported its governance boards had begun considering whether IT investments were designed to deliver operational value to programs or the agency. Doing so provided a starting point for considering the potential savings or efficiencies of investments. But as of February 2024, HUD had not yet begun tracking expected or actual cost savings or efficiencies for individual investments or from its IT governance processes.

HUD officials reported they planned to improve the business case development and review process to quantify planned benefits and cost savings, operational efficiencies, or both, for proposed and ongoing projects. Specifically, HUD plans to leverage previous efforts to implement Technology Business Management and benchmark IT spending to develop processes to evaluate actual cost savings and operational efficiencies and establish a standard methodology to estimate IT costs. As of March 2024, the agency had not yet completed its planned work to address this recommendation.

To fully implement this recommendation, HUD needs to complete its planned work and efforts to establish guidance supporting a repeatable enterprise-wide process for tracking IT-related cost savings and operational efficiencies, including those related to governance decisions. Doing so would improve HUD's ability to monitor the outcomes of its IT governance activities.

High-Risk Area: Improving the Management of IT Acquisitions and Operations

Director: Kevin Walsh
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