

BARK TO BASICS: CREATIVE ADOPTION IDEAS FOR DOG ADOPTIONS

Maximize dog exposure in your community **for more adoptions**



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OUR COMMITMENT to supporting dog adoption

At PEDIGREE Foundation, we constantly look at unique ways we can support the shelter and rescue community. We are so thankful for the work all of you do each day to help save more dogs' lives, especially during an incredibly challenging time in the animal welfare community. If you are reading this toolkit, chances are you are all too familiar with these statistics. Since, 2021, the number of stray pets arriving at shelters and rescues has increased by 26%. More dogs than ever are waiting for homes. This year, for the second year in a row, PEDIGREE Foundation awarded over \$1 million in grant funding, which helped more than 75,000 dogs! But we know there's still work to be done. That's why,



beyond providing grants for initiatives centered around transport networks, behavior modification training, robust foster systems, and adoption programs, we also seek to provide resources that introduce novel best practices, much like the ones outlined in this toolkit.

Resources like this one are a crucial piece of the puzzle. They allow shelters and rescues to share their innovative work and to learn from one another. This toolkit contains creative, easy-to-implement ideas to increase adoption rates at your organization. Shelters and rescues from across the U.S. have brought their best ideas to the table, creating a resource full of helpful advice, strategies, and best practices. We encourage you to bring these ideas back to your teams and adapt them to fit your organization. By building upon these ideas, you create a valuable resource for others.

We see a day when all dogs are safe, secure, fed well and loved. The stories you share with us about the work you do is an inspiration to our vision. It takes a community of care to help dogs find homes, and we are so thankful for the difference you are making in the lives of dogs looking to be a beloved member of a family.

With gratitude,

Deb Fair Executive Director PEDIGREE Foundation

Meg Meredith Grants Manager PEDIGREE Foundation

Why we created this guide

Welcome and we are so happy you came to this guide for inspiration and ideas! We have created this toolkit for anyone to read, enjoy, and learn from. Whether you are a shelter director, an adoption counselor, an animal rescue volunteer, or someone who loves animals and wants to be part of the solution, this guide is for you!

This past year, we've heard from so many of you that getting medium and large dogs adopted feels harder than ever. We reached out to shelters around the US to ask, "What IS working at this moment to get more big dogs adopted?" Our animal shelter and rescue community responded with tons of great ideas including adoption promotions, innovative programs, and creative marketing strategies. We hope this guide can inspire your rescue or shelter to try some of the ideas that have been proven to work in other places.

You've also told us that many of your organizations are facing tight budgets, high staff turnover, and have lots of animals in your care. Virtually any of these ideas can be piloted with just a handful of staff or volunteers and none of them will break the bank! If you're short on time and staff but need a new strategy for getting dogs adopted, this guide is for you! Have questions or want to submit an idea? Reach out to us at pedigree. foundation@effem.com.

This toolkit was created in partnership between the PEDIGREE Foundation and Kristen Hassen of Outcomes for Pets Consulting.



ADVICE FROM THE EXPERTS to get more dogs adopted

- We need to quit apologizing for having big dogs in our shelters. People want big dogs. The reason there are so many big dogs in our shelters is because they are popular. For decades, Labrador Retrievers, German Shepherds, and pit bull type dogs have been among the most popular breeds in the country. We should treat the dogs like they are as popular and wanted as they are and tell adopters about all their great qualities instead of apologizing for having them." Brent Toellner, Senior Director, Lifesaving Programs, Best Friends Animal Society
- * "At our shelter, we get so much love because we are transparent with the community and get them involved. We even take adoptable dogs when we go into neighborhoods to do vaccine clinics because we know there is already a group of people who love pets gathering so why not introduce them to adoptable dogs?" Renena McCaskill, Shelter Manager, Detroit Animal Care and Control
- * "Make it as easy to adopt a dog as it is to buy one. Provide excellent customer service. Let people foster if they aren't sure or hesitant, and let your community you need help, how to help, and then actually let them!"- Monica Dangler, Director, Pima Animal Care Center
- * "Market large dogs individually on social media. This means focusing on only one at a time, even though you have so many filling up your shelter. Adorable photos in a play yard, videos of playing fetch or even better photos and videos and quotes from a dog's day out! Adorable photos that will make everyone smile along with a plea for your followers to share far and wide. Be sure to include all the pertinent info too including what type of home this particular fur baby is looking for." Gina Gardner, Director, Tulsa Humane
- "Use a separate Facebook group for all interested adopters, volunteers, fosters and general supporters who want to help find homes for adoptable animals. Comms staff will continue to use our main accounts to post animals as well, this group removes the limits of how many we can post per day." – Bailey Deacon, Director of Philanthropy and Communications, Baltimore Animal Rescue & Care Shelter
- * "Ask yourself if you've reached ALL potential adopters. Take dogs to offsite locations you've never been to before." Denise Deisler, CEO, Jacksonville Humane
- * "Be welcoming to the community. Talk to them about who they are looking for and give suggestions from your list of adoptable dogs. Having a list of dogs with the most asked for qualities helps alot. Allow folks to interact with the dogs outside of the kennel where everyone can be themselves. Then, let them choose their comfort level. Ready to adopt? great! Two week foster? we can do that! Just for the weekend? that sounds like fun!" Misty Valenta, Director, Williamson County Regional Animal Services
- "If I could give any advice I would tell organizations to stop using the phrase "people only want small dogs, no one wants the big dogs in our shelter". Remember these dogs came from your community and they continue to come from your community so apparently your community does want big dogs you just aren't looking at the right adopters in your community. Have faith, they are there." Mike Wheeler, Director, Cabot Animal Support Services
- Some adopters get worried about adopting big dogs because they live in smaller apartments or houses -- or because they don't have a yard. But, if they plan to exercise their dog physically and mentally outside the home on walks or in parks, then they don't need to have space to run or play inside the house. Breaking down the myth that a big dog needs a big yard and a big house has opened up many pathways to adoption." - Mirah Horowitz, CEO, Lucky Dog Animal Rescue



Dog adoption best practice checklist

Are your policies and procedures hurting your ability to get dogs adopted? Take this simple selfassessment to learn more. If you are unable to check most of these boxes, then good news! There are a lot of easy, free changes you can make today to get more dogs adopted!

- \Box We are open weekends and after 5 pm on weekdays.
- \Box We let people walk through our kennels to see the animals.
- □ We have a greeter and a staff member or volunteer in the kennel areas to help the public.
- U We make it simple and easy to adopt a pet. Adoptions take no more than an hour.
- □ We make pets available and accessible to the public as soon as they enter the shelter unless there is a medical or behavioral issue that needs further evaluation.
- □ We pre-adopt dogs pets still on stray hold and those who still need spay or neuter surgeries.
- Our kennel cards highlight the great things about our pets and get potential adopters excited about them.
- □ Our dogs are available for foster and adoption.
- □ We have a simple adoption questionnaire that is free of red tape´ and screening questions that act as barriers to adoption.
- □ We do not have locks on our kennels and we make it easy for potential adopters to meet dogs.
- □ To learn more, read our previous guide "Build Your Dog Adoption Super Highway."

Get creative! Fun adoption ideas to inspire your community

- Hold a 'gray muzzle' adoption event for dogs over seven years old.
- Host a celebration and adoption event for your specially-abled dogs.
- Have a 'bonded pairs' adoption event for pets who came in together.
- Hold small, regular adoption events featuring dogs with the qualities people are seeking: good with other dogs, has lived with cats, has lived with kids, potty trained, etc.
- Incentivize potential adopters with cool swag for their pets.
- Host family adoption days where families with children can come and meet pets that have previously lived with kids or are especially friendly to all people.
- Offer holiday surprise deliveries of adopted dogs (you can even dress as elves!).
- Create a "date night with a dog" event that invites couples to come take a dog out for a fun foster evening.
- Hold adoption events on most or all holidays. If you are short on staff, this is a great opportunity to engage more volunteers to help complete adoptions.
- Hold adoption events during hours you are not usually open, especially evenings and weekends.
- Bring dogs offsite to pet stores, local businesses, community centers, and vaccine clinics. Volunteers can be hugely helpful if you don't have extra staff for this!
- Hold a competition among staff teams and/or volunteer teams to come up with the most creative idea for an adoption event. For the team that wins, give them a prize and a shout-out on your social media pages.
- Invite the public to share ideas for great adoption event ideas you'll be amazed at how many amazing ideas are shared and you can even turn the brainstormers into volunteers to help with the event.

FAQ: Our adoption events aren't working. What are we doing wrong?

There can be a number of reasons an adoption event is not as successful as you'd hoped. Here are a few of the common reasons.

#1 You didn't communicate effectively with the public. Communicating far and wide about your event is critical to your success. The number of people with awareness of your event is directly related to the number of people who will attend and hopefully adopt.

#2 You hold the same event every year. The public loves a novel experience so keep evolving and changing your adoption events to keep them coming back. Try something totally different or take a slightly different angle on a tried and tested concept.

#3 You didn't give people a good reason to show up. Most of us have so many competing priorities in our day-to-day lives that we need a good reason to come to the shelter. You can offer incentives, tell the public why it's urgent that they come and adopt, or make the event especially fun, with games for kids and even food trucks!

#4 You put barriers or roadblocks up. When you use language like "approved adopters only" or create restrictions and rules like "the entire family must meet the dog," you reduce the number of people who will come and adopt a dog. Adoption events should be a time of welcoming new adopters and celebrating their desire to help.

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GREAT IDEAS to get more dogs adopted

Weekend Adopt A Thon Event | Muttville

Host a large Adopt-a-thon event from 11 am to 4 pm on weekends with free adoptions. For each event, choose a theme and decorate the shelter and dogs accordingly. Take the extra step of reaching out to all adopters who have submitted questionnaires in the last three months to let them know to come and adopt if they are still looking! Simultaneously, host a large bake sale and have community partners set up tents at the event. These events have become a wonderful place for the community to meet mutts and mingle!

Staff Members Needed: 9 staff, 28 volunteers

"We see a huge spike in adoptions from all the focused outreach - often double our regular weekly adoption rate! Additionally, many times fosters who have been on the fence about adopting their dog will decide during the Adoptathon to make their foster mutt a part of their family forever."

Foster First | Operation Kindness

For shelter animals available longer than 14 days, offer a seven-day day trial adoption through a Foster First program. A total of 73 dogs started trials so far and 39 of those fosters adopted.

Staff Members Needed: Customer service team members

"Longer stay dogs are getting adopted! Even for the ones who don't, this is a great program because they get a much-needed break from the shelter. And when they come back, the client provides us more information about the dog which helps us with the next adoption."



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MUTTVILLE



Free Dog Fridays | Lifeline Animal Project

Summer can be the busiest time in shelters, so host Free Dog Fridays, where adoption fees are waived for dogs weighing 25 pounds or more in shelters or foster homes. Lifeline ran the promotion for 13 Fridays and saw tremendous interest and response to the summer promotion. The first weekend was sponsored by donors who wanted to celebrate their adopted dog's adoptaversary. You can also combine this with a shelter Pawjama party to coincide with the promotion.

Staff Members Needed: Staff members in adoptions, marketing, and foster

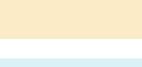
"The best thing is this is so easy to implement and there are so many ways you can expand this with theme nights and other giveaways and promotions. And the best part is that we looked at the data and found out that we adopted 10 more dogs each Friday during the event than other Fridays. We had an average of 29 dogs adopted each Friday of the promotion, and on other Fridays we typically average 19 dogs adoptions."

Featured Dog Fridays | Nashville Humane Association

Highlight a dog needing adoption with the opportunity for people coming in to meet the dog in a special place like the shelter lobby. A volunteer can be recruited to play with the dog and greet the public as they approach and meet the shelter pets. Typically, this strategy works great for long stay dogs that went unnoticed, had poor kennel presence, or just needed a break from the kennel to let their personality shine. At Nashville Humane Society, this gave their marketing staff great social content that can continue to be used for these and other long stay dogs adopted!

Staff Members Needed: 1-2

"We just love seeing a stressed out shelter pet at ease. It's inspiring to see them enjoy the attention and engage with the public."



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hg Homeless





Fetch Some Fun! Playgroup Adoption **Events** | Brandywine Valley SPCA

Hold a playgroup adoption event at your shelter, inviting the public to watch playgroups and learn more about the dogs through watching them interact with each other. Visitors can meet all the dogs and choose their favorite to adopt that day!

Staff Members Needed: 3

"The best thing about playgroup adoption events is seeing large blocky-headed type dogs, some of whom had been long stay residents, get chosen by their new family and finally get to go to their adoptive homes."

Foster-to-Adopt "Test Drives" | Empawthy Animal Rescue. Inc.

A "foster-to-adopt" program gives potential adopters the opportunity to "test drive" the pet they're considering adding to the family. During this time, provide supplies and ongoing support, and be available to address the potential adopter's needs. Empawthy said that they have had adoptive families decide within a couple of days. but also had adoptive families take weeks to determine whether a dog or cat is the right fit...This model is great because it leads to fewer returns and an increased number of adoptions.

Staff Members Needed: 2-5

"We increased the number of adoptions because people are more willing to "test drive" a new pet in their home than to adopt outright. By getting our cats and dogs in homes faster, even temporarily, we are creating more space to be able to help more animals"





Brandywine Valley



ALLIANCE Animals. People. Community.

Dog Field Trips with Volunteers | Seattle Humane

Seattle Humane's Field Trip Program launched this past August. Around 40 dogs have gone on field trips and they have been able to experience the joy of an off-site adventure, with a shelter volunteer. Field trips have included everything from visiting volunteers' personal homes to coffee shops, beautiful Pacific Northwest hikes, pumpkin patches, and a fan-favorite – SniffSpots! SniffSpots are basically private dog parks that are rented by the hour for a small fee. And you can only imagine the amount of 'pup cups' that have been shared!

Staff Members Needed: Foster coordinators and volunteers

"There were no costs associated with the launch or ongoing program activities. We used current and donated items to put together backpacks that volunteers can bring with them on field trips."

Same-Day Test Drive Adoption Program | Humane Rescue Alliance

This program allows anyone: potential adopter, foster, volunteer or staff member to walk-in and leave with a foster dog the same day. Humane Rescue Alliance's primary goal is to increase the flow of dogs into homes by removing as many barriers to fostering and adopting as possible. To make it a success, the adoption and foster staff work together. Adoptions staff provide on-the-spot matchmaking with the potential foster or adopter and the foster team provides follow-up and case management support when needed. In just six months, 256 dogs have been placed in homes through this program.

"This program is low barrier and high reward. We love it because it makes it super easy for supporters to say yes to taking a dog home!"









50 Dogs in Five Days | Oakland Animal Services

When Oakland's shelter was way over capacity for big dogs, they put out a call out to the community to adopt 50 big dogs in five days. The end result was a whopping 90 big dog adoptions. They simply made a specific ask, let the community know why we were asking, and made it easy for them to help.

Staff Members Needed: 5 staff, 30 volunteers

"The understanding from the community and volunteers that we absolutely didn't want to euthanize for space and needed help to prevent that. People came from all over the area to help. As the shelter director, I knew I was going out on a limb by being transparent about the possibility of having to euthanize for space. In the end, it became about the community joining us to save the dogs. The overwhelming feedback we received was gratitude for trying so hard and for giving people the opportunity to help.

Big Dog Summer | Baltimore Animal Rescue and Care Shelter (BARCS)

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90 dogs adopted

Hold a large-scale community event called "Big Dog Summer," during which all adoption fees for all medium and large dogs are waived. This was BARC's first in-shelter adoption event that also had a 30 community and fundraising element. Event activities included: Local crafters and pet supply vendors; family activities including a kids' dogs table with free crafting; behind-the-scenes tours of the shelter; raffles adopted and giveaways; food and dessert vendors (all free!); and a surprise meet-and-greet with Orioles baseball players and the team mascot. BARC's also held a foster dog showcase, where they scheduled big dogs in foster care to schedule exclusive time in our lobby to be the first dogs to greet our guests. The training team also ran dog playgroups that were open for the public to watch. It was a great way for adopters who want a social dog to see those dogs in their best form.

Staff Members Needed: All staff

"The realtor group and Subaru covered all of the adoption costs so this event cost us nothing. Local restaurants and grocery stores donated all of the food. All of the advertising was digital and free."



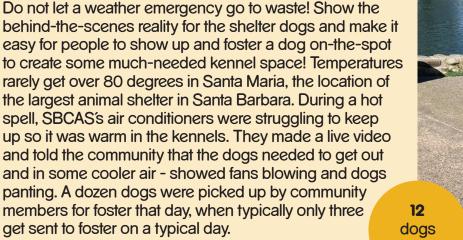








Sudden Emergency | Santa Barbara County Animal Services



Staff Members Needed: 1

adopted

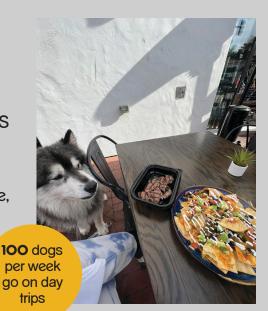
"All you need to do is share a video on social media of the reality of the shelter life during a minor crisis."

Day Foster & Pawjama Party Program | Santa Barbara County Animal Services

Easier to place dogs can be available for day trips and overnight foster, without much effort in matching. SBCAS trained all their staff, added a binder in the lobby which advised anyone coming in that dogs featured with a green dot were ready to be picked up immediately. SBCAS provides all their dogs with martingales at intake, so dogs just needed harnesses and leashes available for participants. They also created a QR code to a marketing form that auto loads into a Chameleon memo!

Staff Members Needed: Regular staffing

"Easy integration into operations."





PJ Pawty | Palm Valley Animal Society

Make dogs available for pajama pawties up to four nights. Palm Valley Animal Society saves the kennel for the dog until the fifth day. They found that 90% of these animals are adopted or turn into long stay fosters on the fifth day. It has helped Palm Valley Animal Society move many dogs out of the shelter.





Midnight Muttness | Pima Animal Care Center

Pima Animal Care Center (PACC) held a "Midnight Muttness" adoption event from 7 pm to Midnight. Members from every staff and volunteer department helped organize it. In addition to making adoptions free, PACC had a DJ, food trucks, a jumping castle, crafts, free pet ID tags and other fun giveaways.

Staff Members Needed: 40



loo+ dogs adopted

"In addition to the hundred animals that found their new families, the response from the community who showed up to support and adopt from PACC was incredibly heartwarming."



Tulsa Home & Garden Show Booth | Humane Society of Tulsa

Participate in annual or large events in your area attracting different audiences! The Humane Society of Tulsa partners with the Greater Tulsa Home Builders Association for their annual Home & Garden Show at their local Fairgrounds and Exposition Building. The event attracts thousands of visitors which provides an enormous built-in audience. The visitors are already interested in home improvement, gardening and have active lifestyles and disposable incomes. The event is dog friendly with many vendors having their pets in their booth and many pet related home services. The Association donates a large (40x20) booth space which Tulsa sets up in coordination with the other vendors' presentations. They use artificial turf to simulate a play area and white picket fencing and have a banner that reads "No Home Is Complete Without A Pet." The show runs four consecutive days for extended hours that incorporate both day and evening. Tulsa has encountered visitors who return multiple times to visit a dog that caught their attention or even had local and out of state vendors who end up adopting a new pet. The marketing is already paid for due to the size of the event. They receive media attention and often live coverage from local stations visiting to promote the show.

Staff Members Needed: 4

"Seek out an event that already has built in foot traffic and built in media coverage. This is such a blessing and you can focus entirely on just having healthy adoptable pets available."





Spring Fling | Williamson County Regional Animal Shelter

Offer the community something other than an adoption event, like a fostering event, which allows those on the fence about taking home an animal the opportunity to try it out short term. The Williamson County Regional Animal Shelter invited the public to participate in a "Spring Fling" by fostering a medium or large adult dog for the weekend. After the weekend, fosters could then decide whether to bring the animal back to the shelter or keep them a bit longer. If the spring fling turns into a long-term commitment, it can then turn into an adoption.

Staff Members Needed: Regular staffing



"If the public isn't sure about a commitment, this is the absolute best time to come to the shelter. The public can take the dog home for the weekend, and if it turns into true love, adoption's an option."

PAWjama Party | Williamson County Regional Animal Shelter

This event began as the "Cat's Pajamas" event. Staff wore their pajamas and the shelter was open two hours later for cat and kitten adoptions on multiple Friday nights during the summer. This proved to be very successful, so WCRAS started to bring dogs up to the lobby as "party crashers." The event morphed into the "PAWjama party" where featured dogs and puppies great visitors in the lobby - all dressed up in their sleepy-best.

Staff Members Needed: 5+



"This event was not only a fantastic way to find homes, it was incredible enrichment for the dogs!"



Sleepover Program | Providence Animal Center

PAC's Sleepover program allows the community to take a pet on a 'test drive' by bringing an adult dog home for 1-3 days with the intention of keeping them forever, but even if it doesn't work out, the dog got a break from the kennels. Here is how they market the program:

Interested in taking a dog on a sleepover? Stop by our Adoption Center! Sleepovers can take place Tuesday-Sunday and dogs must be returned by 5:30pm (Tuesday-Friday) and by 4:30pm (Saturday and Sunday) on the last day of your sleepover, unless you choose to adopt!

Staff Members Needed: 2

"It costs no money and creates an opportunity for large dogs to move into homes with low commitment. It is a win-win opportunity for dogs to go into a home environment and either stay there permanently or give us valuable information about the dog in a home to help match them with their perfect future adopter."

Trial Adoption Program | Lucky Dog Animal Rescue

Lucky Dog Animal Rescue is an organization that receives animals from overcrowded shelters in southern states. They offer trial adoptions to people that agree to adopt an animal sight unseen off the transport van. The benefit of the trial is that the person will receive a full refund if the adoption does not work out. This program is great because it gets an animal out of the shelter and it doesn't use up a regular foster home in the process. It allows them to post animals from southern shelter partners to our website to see if we can get some adoption interest --without having to bring the animal into foster right away. This has resulted in a few of our transport partner's super long stay dogs getting adopted!

Staff Members Needed: Adoption coordinators

"We have an extremely low percentage of returns -- less than 1% with trial adoptions. The key is setting the expectation that they'll keep the animal for two weeks so they get through the common challenges that come with accommodating a new animal in the home."

1,000+ dogs adopted





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Waived Fee Wednesdays and More Adoption Specials | KC Pet Project

At KC Pet Project, they do adoption specials frequently in an effort to move pets of the shelter. They are great because they draw attention to the organization and their pets, and they give KC Pet Project an opportunity to be cute and creative. The team says they always send our specials to the media for them to feature, especially on the weekends, when they are looking for content to share.

KC Pet Project typically has specials on holidays too when people are off work and can bring their families to the shelter. In 2023, they launched Waived Fee Wednesdays where every Wednesday, dogs over 20 pounds and older than 6 months old are free to adopt, which has helped them move more dogs out during the middle of the week.

KC Pet Project also started adopting out dogs that are on their at-risk list for free this year. Most of those dogs are added to the list for length of stay and quality of life, which is helping keep their length of stay at a manageable timeline for how full they are.

Professional athletes, like Derrick Nnadi with the Chiefs and Josh Staumont with the Royals, have helped adopt out nearly 500 dogs thanks to their partnerships where they sponsor dog adoptions..

Lastly, KC Pet Project launched their "Adoptable Pets of KC Pet Project" Facebook Group, which gives their volunteers, staff, and fosters a platform to share their favorite pets and fosters. KC Pet Project trys to stay out in front of the community to keep them informed of what they are experiencing, how the community can help and who they can adopt.





KC PET PROJECT

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A Final Note

By implementing creative strategies and adhering to best practices, organizations can significantly boost the exposure of dogs and therefore increase adoptions in their communities. Supporting staff and fostering collaboration within the community are crucial elements in the journey to finding more dogs their forever homes. Through effective communication, inviting community participation, offering incentives, and creating a welcoming atmosphere, organizations can make a substantial impact on the lives of countless dogs nationwide. The potential for groundbreaking ideas are boundless – they can emerge from anyone, anywhere, at any time. **Remember to stay open-minded, to say 'YES' to innovative ideas, and work collaboratively to ensure every shelter dog has a fighting chance to find a loving home.**





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