

SOCIAL WORK IN WARTIME UKRAINE:

Changing the Professional Landscape



Edited by Tetyana Semigina

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Tallinn
TEADMUS
2026

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**Recommended for publication by the Academic Council of the Academy
of Labour, Social Relations and Tourism (minutes No. 5 of 16.12.2025)**

Semigina, T. (Ed). (2026).

**Social Work in Wartime Ukraine: Changing the Professional
Landscape. Tallinn: Teadmus. 504 p.**

ISBN 978-9916-752-57-9

The edited volume offers a comprehensive and timely analysis of how social work theory, practice, and education in Ukraine are being reshaped by prolonged war. The book examines professionalisation processes, community resilience, responses to internal displacement, psychosocial and gender-sensitive interventions, and innovations in formal and non-formal social work education.

The book targets scholars, university teachers, advanced social work practitioners, and policy-oriented professionals.

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ISBN 978-9916-752-57-9

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Chapter 13

Non-Formal Social Work Education in Ukraine for Building Competence in Crisis

Olha BAIDAROVA, Tetyana SEMIGINA

Abstract

The concept of non-formal education plays a central role in lifelong learning and professional development in social work, particularly in contexts of rapid social change and crisis. The International Leadership and Development Centre (ILDC) has been operating in Ukraine since 2007 as an institution specializing in non-formal social work training. Over time, ILDC has demonstrated significant adaptability in responding to the evolving educational needs of social work professionals, especially during the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian war. This paper examines the integration of best practices and innovative pedagogical approaches within ILDC's non-formal training programs, with a focus on their alignment with internationally recognized standards and competence-based models. The analysis explores how these practices support social workers operating in high-stress and crisis-affected environments, enhancing professional effectiveness, resilience, and retention. Based on ILDC's experience, the paper identifies key lessons and practical insights for the development of responsive and sustainable non-formal social work education in contexts shaped by armed conflict and political instability.

Keywords: *non-formal social work training, competence model, adaptability, Ukraine, wartime educational needs, best practices.*

INTRODUCTION

The ongoing Russo-Ukrainian War, which began in 2014 and escalated in 2022, has resulted in widespread humanitarian crises and significant disruptions across Ukraine. This conflict has displaced millions of people, devastated infrastructure, and severely strained social services. The war has created unprecedented challenges for social work practitioners, necessitating innovative and adaptive educational responses. Specialists providing social services, social assistance, and support during emergencies face a lack of professional competencies and risks of emotional burnout (Better Care Network, 2023; Gusak et al., 2024). Traditional educational systems, with their inherent rigidity and slow adaptation to new realities, have struggled to address these emergent needs effectively.

In response to these pressing challenges, non-formal education has emerged as a critical and flexible approach, offering the ability to rapidly adapt to the changing landscape of social work practice during wartime. This chapter presents the experience of the International Leadership and Development Centre (ILDC), a Ukrainian non-governmental organization. As Ukraine's traditional educational systems have struggled to address the emergent needs induced by the war (Karagodina, 2024), ILDC has implemented targeted training programs to equip social workers with essential skills to respond to the complex challenges posed by the armed conflict.

The research methodology utilizes a **single case study approach** (Horner et al., 2005), focusing on ILDC as a representative example. This method allows for a comprehensive examination of ILDC's non-formal education initiatives a characteristic of non-formal learning can be identified through systematic observation, interviews with trainees and trainers, or analysis of curricula and educational plans. With regard to that, the preparation of this chapter involved a review of ILDC's educational projects, training materials, including routine training assessments, and a specially arranged focus group with eight trainers and methodologists. This methodology provides a robust framework for analyzing ILDC's pedagogical strategies, demonstrating how their adaptive training methods have significantly strengthened the capacity and resilience of social work practitioners.

CONTEXTUAL INFORMATION

The Russo-Ukrainian War presents significant challenges for Ukrainian social workers as they strive to provide social welfare and mental health services. As a “complex emergency,” the war imposes daily stress on Ukrainians through life-threatening conditions that severely disrupt the population's capacity to survive. These include rocket and artillery shelling, drone attacks, the seizure of settlements, occupation, forced deportations, constant information warfare,

nuclear threats, attacks on energy infrastructure leading to “blackouts,” and surges of internally displaced persons and refugees.

ACLED’s Ukraine Conflict Monitor has recorded over 42,000 incidents of political violence (ACLED, 2025). Access to essential health and welfare services is significantly hindered, yet social work professionals and volunteers persist in their efforts amidst the evolving, protracted armed conflict and political instability (Semigina & Stoliaryk, 2024).

Studies indicate a sharp increase in the traumatic nature of working conditions, with high levels of burnout and compassion fatigue reported among social workers (Butylina & Buhai, 2022; ; Gusak et al., 2024; Kolleda, 2024). Civilians face numerous short- and long-term consequences of living through war, including severe trauma (Anjum et al. 2023). Families and communities are deeply affected, but children experience the most severe impacts. These include immediate stress responses, heightened risk for mental health disorders, distress caused by forced separation from parents, and fears for personal and familial safety (Bürgin et al., 2022).

Research from other countries affected by armed conflict highlights the importance of trauma-informed social work practices, particularly in addressing developmental trauma caused by childhood exposure to violence (Harrop, 2020; Knight, 2015).

In response, Ukrainian social workers must develop and implement multilevel, need-oriented, and trauma-informed approaches to support individuals and communities in regaining and sustaining both external and internal security during wartime emergencies and in the aftermath of war-related trauma.

THE CONCEPT OF NON-FORMAL LIFELONG LEARNING

The concept of lifelong learning has gained significant attention in the context of social work education, particularly in light of the rapidly changing social, economic, and political environments. Lifelong learning encompasses all learning activities undertaken throughout life, with the aim of improving knowledge, skills, and competencies from a personal, civic, social, and employment-related perspective (Commission of the European Communities, 2001).

Non-formal learning is defined as learning activities that occur outside of formal education or training institutions and typically do not lead to certification. Despite this, non-formal learning is intentional and systematically organized to develop specific skills and competencies (Grajcevci and Shala, 2016). Various forms of non-formal learning, such as workshops, seminars, mentoring, and peer learning, provide flexible and accessible methods for enhancing professional skills. Non-

formal learning opportunities, especially online courses and webinars, can reach a wider audience, including those in remote or underserved areas. Berman (2020) underscores the value of informal learning spaces, which contribute to the overall learning experience by providing a more relaxed and interactive environment for skill development and knowledge sharing.

For social workers, this approach is crucial in maintaining the relevance and effectiveness of their practice, especially in times of crisis. It provides opportunities for continuous education and skill enhancement, essential for addressing the complex and dynamic nature of social work. Non-formal learning plays a crucial role in building community resilience and capacity (Semigina et al., 2024). This is particularly important in times of crises, such as the Russo-Ukrainian War, where social workers face unprecedented challenges that require immediate and effective responses. Randall, Brooks, and Heck (2022) highlight that both formal and informal learning can serve as deterrents of turnover intentions among frontline workers during a crisis. This underscores the importance of providing diverse learning opportunities to support the retention and effectiveness of social work practitioners.

In sum, non-formal lifelong learning is a vital component of professional development in social work. Unlike formal education, it occurs outside structured academic programs but is intentionally designed to enhance specific knowledge, skills,

and competencies. For social workers, these practices are essential for maintaining professional relevance, responding effectively to crises. **Figure 13. 1** presents a conceptual overview of this framework, which underpins the subsequent analysis.

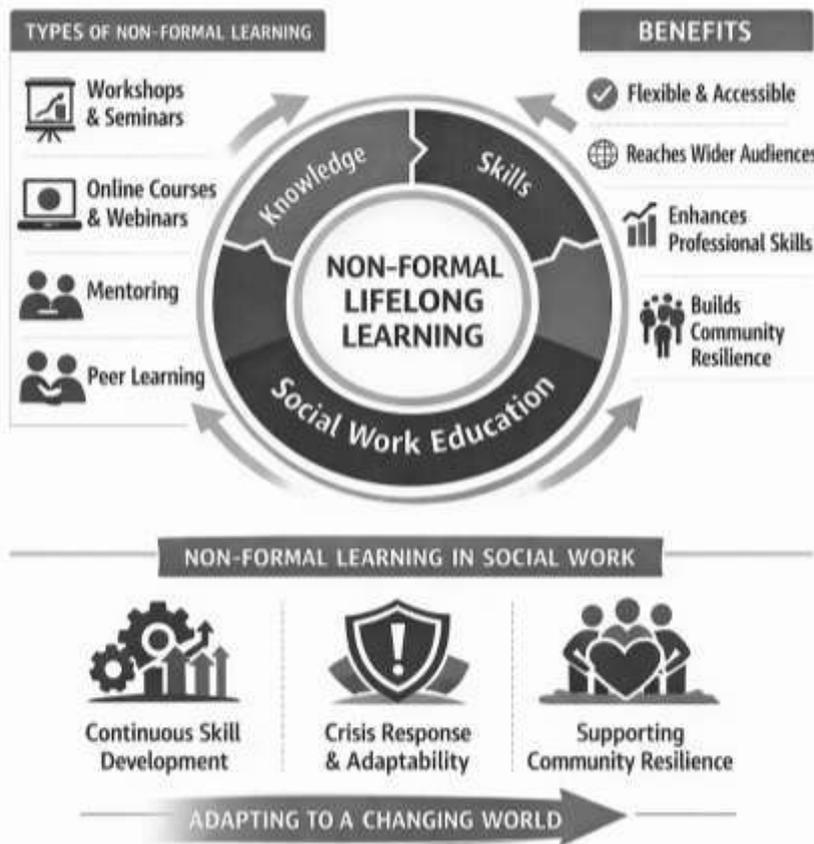


Figure 13.1. Conceptual Framework of Non-Formal Lifelong Learning in Social Work

■ CASE OF INTERNATIONAL LEADERSHIP AND DEVELOPMENT CENTRE (ILDC)

ILDC's mission and pedagogical approach

The International Leadership and Development Centre (ILDC) is an international non-governmental organization established in Ukraine in 2007, dedicated to advancing professional training in social work. ILDC's mission revolves around enhancing the competence of professionals and the organizational capacity of entities involved in safeguarding children's rights. This mission underscores the importance of ensuring safety, stability, and well-being for children within familial contexts. By developing a training system rooted in a competency-based approach and informed by scientifically grounded best practices, ILDC aims to provide systematic and high-quality training for professionals and bolster the overall capacity of organizations engaged in child protection.

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ILDC offers both closed and open training programs, including custom training sessions for organizations and publicly accessible webinars and training sessions. This dual approach ensures that training is tailored to specific needs while remaining accessible to a broader audience. The key principle guiding ILDC's educational approach is "Right participant - right trainer - right training program," ensuring that the training provided is relevant, effective, and impactful (ILDC, 2024).

ILDC's pedagogical approach is grounded in a competency-based model developed by the Institute for Human Services, a US non-profit organization (Rycus & Hughes, 2001). This model outlines key competencies required for effective child safety and welfare practice, guiding the creation of training programs to enhance the skills and knowledge of social workers, foster parents, guardians, and adoptive parents. The model includes defining professional functions, analyzing job tasks, identifying required competencies, and outlining the knowledge, skills, values, and beliefs needed to achieve them. Competency acquisition occurs in stages:

- Recognizing: Gaining basic understanding, minimal facts, and acknowledging the topic's relevance.
- Knowing: Acquiring facts, theories, and concepts, and applying them through critical analysis.
- Being able to: Learning strategies for behavior in specific situations.
- Mastering skills: Applying learned strategies to develop practical skills.

ILDC also integrates the Experiential Learning Cycle model (Kolb, 1984) which emphasizes practical experience and interactions, further enhancing the effectiveness of training programs. Thus, ILDC's programs combine theoretical and practical elements, allowing participants to apply learned concepts in real-world scenarios. This approach deepens

understanding and equips participants with the practical skills necessary for effective social work practice.

Combining online and offline training gained significant momentum during the pandemic, proving effective for professional development in social work, and was further elaborated in the wartime. One exemplary case is the "Organization and Facilitation of Support Groups" program developed by ILDC. The program begins with an organizational meeting where participants are introduced to the experts and fellow trainees. This initial session alleviates tension and ensures all participants understand the training process, assessment criteria, and certification requirements, setting a collaborative and supportive learning environment.

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Participants are required to apply their acquired knowledge by facilitating support groups themselves, ideally under the supervision of an ILDC's supervisor. This hands-on experience consolidates their learning and provides valuable practical insights. After the practical sessions, participants reconvene in small supervisory groups to discuss and reflect on their experiences, receive feedback, and refine their skills. The training concludes with a question-and-answer session and post-tests to assess their understanding and mastery of the course material.

The program's blended learning approach allows for flexible participation, catering to professionals with varying schedules and responsibilities. By engaging in practical exercises and

real-world applications, participants not only understand theoretical concepts but also learn how to apply them effectively. The program includes multiple stages of support and supervision, providing ongoing guidance and feedback throughout the learning journey. Covering critical aspects of organizing and facilitating support groups, ILDC's program serves as a model for implementing best practices in social work pedagogy, particularly in settings characterized by armed conflict and political violence.

Training content is developed in collaboration with local and international experts to incorporate global best practices and address current needs. A critical component of ILDC's approach is the careful selection of trainers based on their expertise, experience, and alignment with ILDC's mission. Trainers are chosen for their extensive backgrounds in social work and their ability to convey complex concepts in practical and engaging ways. All experts selected by ILDC must pass the Training Course for Trainers (ToT). This ensures that training is rooted in best practices and tailored to the unique context of Ukraine's social work environment. The trainers at ILDC are not just experts; they are skilled communicators who are specifically prepared for modern training methods.

Through these well-rounded and expertly delivered programs, ILDC aims to build a robust and competent workforce capable of addressing the multifaceted challenges faced by children and families in Ukraine.

Rapid response to the full-scale war

During the focus group discussion, ILDC's trainers and methodologists emphasized the substantial challenges faced by practitioners due to the war. They noted the significantly large increase in the number of clients, coupled with an expansion of client categories and the emergence of new groups, such as military personnel, their families, and internally displaced persons, among others. Additionally, the trainers highlighted the dual role practitioners must navigate—providing professional support while being personally affected by the war—raising concerns about the need for sustained professional support to maintain a professional stance and manage the risks of secondary traumatization. Furthermore, the necessity for practitioners to learn and acquire new competencies under the stress of ongoing conflict was underscored, with trainers observing a corresponding decline in cognitive functions due to both acute and prolonged stress.

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Since the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, ILDC has initiated the project “Providing Psychological and Social Help and Support to Ukrainian People During War.” This project encompasses various activities aimed at supporting individuals affected by the conflict. Key initiatives include training programs for specialists on organizing psychological support groups, providing supportive groups for professionals experiencing burnout, and enhancing

competencies in social work during wartime. Implemented in the early months of the war, when the situation was unclear, uneven, and dynamic, the project addressed urgent needs under rapidly changing circumstances.

The training program consists of five online sessions, during which participants learn to conduct support groups either online or offline. Additionally, supervisory meetings are held to review the outcomes of these groups and provide further guidance. Participants gain a thorough understanding of crisis, stress, and trauma, acquiring foundational knowledge of these concepts and their impact on individuals affected by war. They also learn resilience approaches, gaining techniques to help build resilience in those affected by war, thereby promoting psychological stability and recovery. Furthermore, participants develop skills in facilitating support groups, obtaining practical knowledge on how to work with and effectively facilitate such groups to ensure a safe and productive environment for all involved.

The program was initially developed based on the results of the first training sessions, feedback from participants, and registration forms that included questions about education, job position, work functions, experience, and learning needs. It was found that many potential participants already had or were obtaining relevant education, so the program was adjusted to focus on specific methods and tools. There was also a significant need for supervision among participants,

leading to a careful revision of sessions on methods and tools for preventing emotional burnout and on supervision and intervision as paths to professional growth. An additional session was added for organizational leaders on how to work with teams to prevent burnout.

When preparing to deliver this training program for an organization working with military personnel and their families, the program was again adapted to meet the participants' needs. Topics on secondary traumatic stress, compassion fatigue, the effects of prolonged stress, psychological first aid (PFA) and support in the face of loss, and models for maintaining resilience were expanded. This adaptivity ensured that the training remained relevant and effective in addressing the unique challenges faced by different groups.

In July 2022, ILDC opened the *BeProfi* online training platform, designed to offer competency-based training for child protection workers. This platform provides flexible and accessible learning opportunities that can be immediately applied in practice. Participants register on the platform, undergo needs assessment tests, select appropriate courses, complete pre-tests, engage in online learning, and apply their newly acquired skills in their professional roles. The platform also tracks progress and conducts post-training assessments to measure the impact of the training on participants' work.

BeProfi functions similarly to traditional MOOC platforms, facilitating a comprehensive and structured training process.

In September 2022, ILDC launched the project "Building Capacity of Organizations and Specialists to Provide Social Services and Socio-Psychological Help and Support to Ukrainian People During the War." The goal of this project is to develop and strengthen the capacity of organizations and specialists who provide social services to the population during the war by enhancing professional competencies and preventing emotional burnout.

The project encompasses several key activities. First, it focuses on developing the professional competencies of specialists in the social sphere for working with children and families both during and after the war. This includes conducting webinars for specialists and parents, as well as training courses aimed at developing necessary skills such as working with trauma, understanding resilience, supporting bereaved families, handling crisis communication, and providing family support during wartime.

Second, the project addresses the prevention of professional burnout among specialists. In the summer of 2023, a team of seven experts and methodologists developed and implemented the training program "Support for Children and Families Coping with War-Related Loss." Within two months, the program was launched. It is based on classical theories describing loss as a traumatic event, explaining the impact of

potentially traumatic events, the process of grieving, factors complicating mourning, and the primary focuses, tasks, and methods of providing psychosocial support to families experiencing loss. The program developers are recognized experts in grief support who, even before the war, worked with children, families, and youth dealing with "non-war-related losses". Their profound understanding of the subject matter, enriched with real-world examples from their practice, has made the program highly relevant to the current needs of Ukrainian children and families facing various losses due to the ongoing conflict. In response to the demand for enhancing the competence of social workers dealing with families of missing persons, a dedicated session on working with children and families experiencing ambiguous loss was included.

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All these ILDC's rapid responses demonstrate ILDC's adaptability and dedication to mitigating the effects of war on vulnerable populations by enhancing professional competencies, preventing burnout among social workers, and ensuring effective support mechanisms are in place for both specialists and those directly impacted by the armed conflict.

Evidences of effectiveness

The effectiveness of ILDC's training programs is demonstrated by significant improvements in participants' knowledge, skills, and competencies, as shown by pre- and post-training evaluations. For instance, in the program "Help and Support for Children and Families Experiencing War-Related Losses,"

the average pre-test score was 5.38, increasing to 7.31 post-training (t-test $p=0.0005$). Similarly, in the "Organizing and Conducting Psychological Support Groups" program, there was a statistically significant improvement in scores, with participants confirming the practical application of the learned material. New facilitators successfully led multiple support groups, with some reaching over 240 individuals. Participants cited several factors that supported the application of new skills, including structuring their experiences through knowledge systematization, participating in support groups, receiving supervision, using a handbook, and sharing insights with colleagues.

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The effectiveness of ILDC's programs is also evidenced by testimonials and case studies from participants and organizations. Participants have shared their transformative experiences, illustrating the real-world impact of our programs. One trainee noted, "The training exceeded my expectations, providing me with invaluable support and a clear structure for conducting support groups."

Another participant highlighted the practical benefits, saying, "Each session was a revelation, and the BeProfi platform made the learning process engaging and effective. This training opened up new opportunities for communication and collaboration."

Additionally, participants have found the training crucial for their professional development. One trainee remarked, "The

knowledge gained about working with children who have experienced loss and adults dealing with ambiguous loss was particularly valuable for my work."

Organizations have also reported significant improvements. A team leader shared, "Our employees and volunteers gained high-quality practical skills and knowledge. We now better understand how to support families in crisis, ensuring the safety and well-being of children. These changes have made our work more effective and impactful."

These testimonials and case studies demonstrate the substantial positive impact of our training programs, reinforcing their effectiveness and real-world applicability.

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Another significant indicator of the effectiveness of ILDC's approach is its alignment with best practices.

Initially, ILDC adopted a US model (Rycus & Hughes, 2001), known for its robust framework and effectiveness in social work and child protection. This foundational model provided a comprehensive, competency-based approach, which has been adapted to meet the specific needs of Ukraine's social work environment. By incorporating this model, ILDC ensured that its training programs were grounded in methodologies that have been proven effective in many other contexts (McDonald et al., 2022; Toland, 2006). This alignment with a globally respected standard provided a solid foundation for the development and implementation of

training programs that address the unique challenges faced by social workers in Ukraine.

Research by Karagodina et al. (2021) highlights the positive outcomes achieved through ILDC's adaptation of the competency-based model. Their findings demonstrate significant improvements in the training and performance of social workers, showcasing the effectiveness of a structured, competency-focused approach.

ILDC's ongoing commitment to best practices is reflected in its continuous improvement processes. The training programs are regularly updated based on participant feedback, new research findings, and evolving best practices in social work and child protection globally. This ensures that the training remains current, relevant, and effective. The quick response to the emerging needs of social work practitioners during times of war further demonstrates the effectiveness of non-formal education in addressing real-world challenges efficiently.

In summary, ILDC's training programs align with globally recognized best practices by initially employing a proven international model and continuously adapting it to fit the local context. This approach guarantees that social work professionals are equipped with the skills, knowledge, and support necessary to provide high-quality services to children and families in Ukraine.

LESSONS LEARNED

ILDC's experiences during the ongoing war in Ukraine provide valuable lessons for developing effective pedagogical practices in social work within challenging contexts. The organization's swift adaptation to the needs of a war-affected population highlights several key insights that can serve as recommendations for educators globally.

1. *Flexibility and Responsiveness.* In regions facing extreme situations like armed conflict and political violence, the ability to swiftly adapt training programs to emerging needs is essential. ILDC's experience in rapidly modifying its curriculum to address the evolving circumstances in Ukraine underscores the importance of being responsive and flexible. Training programs should be designed to allow for quick adjustments based on the changing realities on the ground.
2. *Integration of Technology.* Leveraging online platforms and digital tools ensures the continuity and accessibility of training programs, even in challenging contexts. ILDC's successful use of BeProfi demonstrates how technology can overcome physical and logistical barriers, allowing social workers to continue their professional development in real-time. Notably, group learning on these platforms has proven highly effective, optimizing the combination of platform resources and

group interaction. This approach is particularly valuable when traditional in-person training is not feasible, fostering a collaborative learning environment that enhances skill acquisition and application.

3. *Emphasis on Practical Application.* Providing social workers with opportunities for hands-on experience and the immediate application of learned skills enhances the effectiveness of training programs. ILDC's focus on practical sessions and supervisory meetings helps reinforce theoretical knowledge and build practitioners' confidence. Training should include simulations, role-playing, and supervised practical activities to ensure that participants can effectively translate learning into practice.
4. *Holistic Support Systems.* Supporting the well-being of social workers is crucial, especially in extreme situations. ILDC's approach to providing emotional and professional support through support groups and supervision has proven effective. Ensuring that social workers receive comprehensive support helps maintain their resilience and effectiveness. Training programs should incorporate elements that address the mental health and well-being of practitioners, fostering a supportive and sustainable professional environment.
5. **Structured Competency-Based Training Process:** The implementation of a competency-based approach has

proven crucial for developing specialized skills in social work professionals. By focusing on defined competencies and structuring training around specific skills and knowledge areas, ILDC has enhanced the effectiveness of its programs. The clear delineation of competencies—ranging from recognizing basic phenomena to mastering practical skills—ensures that training is targeted and actionable, ultimately improving professional practice.

These insights and recommendations demonstrate how strategic non-formal educational approaches can serve as best practices in social work pedagogy, particularly in settings characterized by armed conflict and political violence.

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