

# Reducing domestic violence reoffending

Interventions to reduce domestic violence reoffending in the immediate post-offence period



# About this report

The James Martin Institute worked with colleagues from government and a panel of expert advisors to develop a research report on perpetrator interventions aimed at reducing domestic violence reoffending in the period immediately following (up to three months) an initial offence. This research sought to identify potential, evidence-based options for the NSW Government to broaden its initiatives to address domestic violence reoffending in this critical period. This involved providing an evidence base of jurisdictional case studies (Victoria, Queensland, New Zealand, and Scotland), outlining examples of services and programs, and synthesising existing research, with a specific focus on perpetrator interventions. The research specifically excluded consideration of any existing programs and responses in NSW. The report provided a detailed set of considerations for policy and practice in engaging domestic violence perpetrators in the immediate post-offence period and deterring them from reoffending.

**This paper provides a short summary of the project's key research findings.**

Responses to domestic violence must continue to protect victim-survivors from harm while establishing accountability for perpetrators. While it is vital that perpetrator-focused interventions are improved, the paramount consideration guiding policy and practice must be the safety and well-being of victim-survivors. Working with domestic violence perpetrators to hold them to account for their behaviour should not detract from this objective and the ongoing need to ensure support, protection, and empowerment of victim-survivors.



# Reducing domestic violence reoffending: Interventions to reduce domestic violence reoffending in the immediate post-offence period

## The challenge

**Reducing the number of domestic violence reoffenders by 25 per cent by 2023, based on a 2015 baseline, is a NSW Premier's Priority.** Preventing domestic violence entirely is a long-term aspiration: victim-survivors must be protected; perpetrators must be held to account. An important step towards achieving that long-term goal is to reduce domestic violence reoffending.

**A significant portion of reoffending currently occurs in a relatively short period of time after an initial offence is recorded.** Yet, it is precisely during this window – prior to conviction – that suitable interventions are difficult to configure and execute. There are limited options for accountability for perpetrators before trial and most men's behaviour change programs are not geared towards managing short-term risks.

There are **limited sources of evidence regarding the effectiveness of discrete interventions** within the first three months following an initial offence. However, there are principles that can be drawn from the literature and the case studies to inform perpetrator interventions in this period.

## The response

**A multi-faceted approach is needed that engages with the concrete needs and circumstances of the perpetrator in order to build their accountability for their choices to use violence, while mitigating the risks of further harm.** The approach taken here is premised on the value of a holistic, human-centric approach that is responsive to the needs of specific perpetrators in their own circumstances that will enhance their accountability and improve the well-being and safety of victim-survivors. There are strong grounds for

adopting this approach based on wider experience of effective public policy, and social policy in particular. The system must **act quickly to deter** further violence and build perpetrators' sense of accountability.

Perpetrators must be seen as unique individuals with **diverse characteristics** and **numerous factors exacerbating their choices to use violence**. Their circumstances (and those of their victim and family) need to be **quickly assessed by a range of relevant stakeholders** – justice workers, service providers, social workers, community representatives – to understand their needs.

The perpetrator might need help to **navigate** a complex legal and service system. A key barrier, however, is that many perpetrators are unwilling to accept their wrongdoing, and, before a conviction, authorities have limited means to compel them to engage in programs. The system needs to find ways to **motivate** perpetrators to seek help. A system designed and delivered with the **community** in which a perpetrator lives would likely help. Leveraging other factors, especially the perpetrator's desire to be a **better parent**, can be effective.

Any effective response to individual perpetrators, including by recognising their familial and social context, would benefit from the **empowerment of those practitioners and community representatives who engage directly with perpetrators** and can best understand their needs and tailor responses to those needs in a manner that will enhance accountability. System-level investments should therefore be especially alert to the opportunities of harnessing the capabilities and relational judgements of social workers and community representatives as they engage with perpetrators and those affected by their behaviour.

## A multi-faceted response based on need

Our findings can be summarised under **five key considerations** for designing programs to reduce reoffending in the immediate post-offence period:

1. Provide a **range of wraparound services**, including accommodation support and general human services, so that responses can be tailored to the **specific needs of the perpetrator** to enhance their accountability.
2. **Empower** those with an understanding of an individual perpetrator's needs – especially **social workers** and **community representatives** – to do as much of that tailoring as possible.
3. Support perpetrators to **navigate** complex service systems and harness their motivation to seek help and change behaviour.
4. Connect services for **victim-survivors**, as well as other services specifically for children, to perpetrator interventions.
5. Monitor examples of **focused deterrence** programs, as they mature, to assess if these are appropriate for the NSW context.

## The services and programs

Given the intertwined challenges of perpetrators needing bespoke responses, practitioners needing flexibility to deliver tailored services, and the extensive waitlists and delays in accessing such programs, developing **interim or bridging programs** that can immediately accommodate new perpetrators would likely be beneficial.

If perpetrators pose a higher risk for reoffending, **monitoring or deterrence programs** might help by consistently reinforcing their accountability and reminding them of the consequences of further violence.

**Accommodation support** for perpetrators can help physically separate perpetrators from victim-survivors, while also providing **an environment conducive to wraparound services**.

**Men's behaviour change programs** – or alternatives such as **individual counselling** – could play a constructive role in the immediate post-offence period. However, there is a lack of robust evidence that such

programs can change behaviour in the short term to deter further violence. These activities could be adapted and leveraged during the immediate post-offence period to achieve short-term harm reduction and hold perpetrators to account as part of a broader strategy.

Given that many perpetrators have comorbidities that influence their violent behaviour, **general human services** (social assistance services) – like drug and/or alcohol therapy or mental health support – can help alleviate those stressors.

**Services for victim-survivors (including children) and child services** need to be connected into these perpetrator interventions, to help ensure their interests are reflected and the perpetrator is kept in view.

## Towards better outcomes

There is no response that can guarantee that any one perpetrator will not reoffend. A system that **quickly, meaningfully, and holistically** builds the perpetrator's sense of accountability and that addresses the factors that exacerbate their choice to use violence will, however, give victim-survivors a better chance of living free of further violence before perpetrators go to trial.

Going forward, it will be important to remain **attentive to the particular circumstances on the ground**, craft programs in that light, explore new approaches, rigorously monitor results, and iterate and scale up investments based on what is being learnt.

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## The Premier's Priority

In 2015, the NSW Government established a **Premier's Priority to Reduce Domestic Violence Reoffending**. In June 2019, the then Premier revised the target, committing to a **25 per cent reduction in the number of domestic violence reoffenders by 2023**. A 25 per cent reduction means reducing the number of domestic violence offenders to 1,360 reoffenders by December 2023. In December 2021 – there were 2,016 domestic violence reoffenders. Therefore, a reduction of 656 domestic violence reoffenders is currently required to meet the target by 2023.

Source: NSW BOCSAR, [DV Assault Reoffenders December 2021](#)

# Key considerations: Services and programs

Overarching considerations applying to the whole system of perpetrator referral pathways, mechanisms, services and programs.

## Referral pathways and programs

Referral pathways and programs that are responsive to the needs of perpetrators and victim-survivors can help make domestic violence interventions more effective.

### Key example(s):

- Integrated Safety Response (New Zealand)
- Integrated Service Response (QLD)
- Caledonian System (Scotland)
- [The Life Programme](#) (United Kingdom)

## Community-based approaches

Community-based approaches to referral pathways and programs could help improve the effectiveness and legitimacy of perpetrator interventions in the immediate post-offence period.

### Key example(s):

- Integrated Safety Response (New Zealand)
- [Maranguka Justice Reinvestment](#) (NSW)

## Motivating perpetrator engagement in referral pathways, services and programs

Motivating perpetrators to engage in the immediate-post offence period is a key barrier – a range of approaches could be employed to overcome this challenge.

### Key example(s):

- [Tackling Violence](#) (NSW)
- [Caring Dads](#) (Canada, Australia, United Kingdom, USA)

## Interim programs for perpetrators

Interim or bridging programs for perpetrators in the immediate post-offence period ensure rapid delivery of relevant services and programming. These programs could help overcome availability and scope issues that make longer-term programs less relevant.

### Key example(s):

- 'Safe and Together' referral pathway (Scotland)

## Referral pathways and mechanisms for perpetrators

### Multi-agency triage and referral systems to effectively meet perpetrator needs

Referral pathways take a multi-agency, wraparound approach to managing perpetrators in the immediate post-offence period, facilitating timely information-sharing, jointly conducting risk assessments, and rapidly delivering relevant, tailored services.

#### Key example(s):

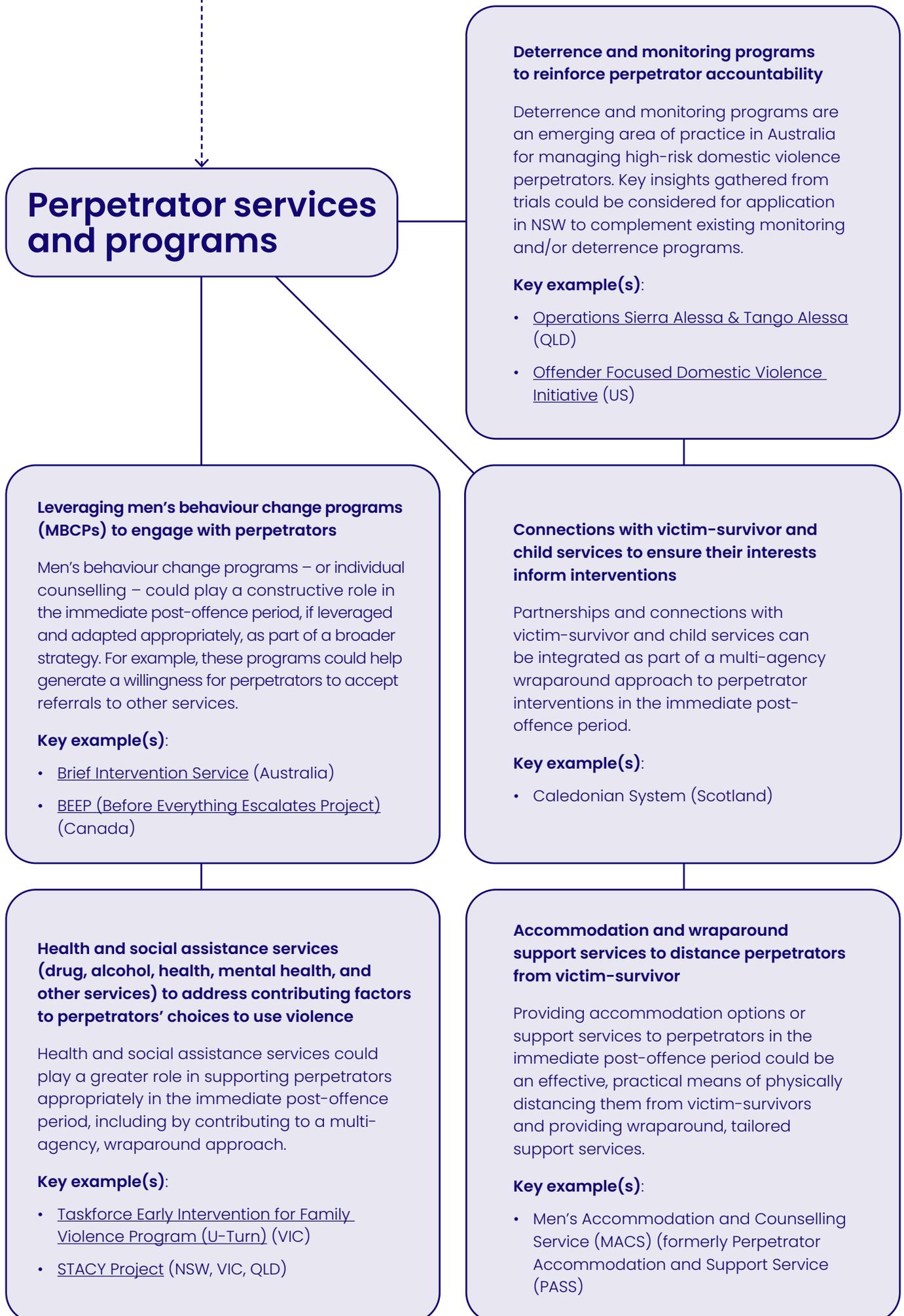
- Integrated Safety Response (New Zealand)
- Integrated Service Response (QLD)
- Caledonian System (Scotland)
- [Multi-Agency Triage Project](#) (VIC)
- [Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conference](#) (Scotland)
- [Multiple and Complex Needs Initiative](#) (VIC)

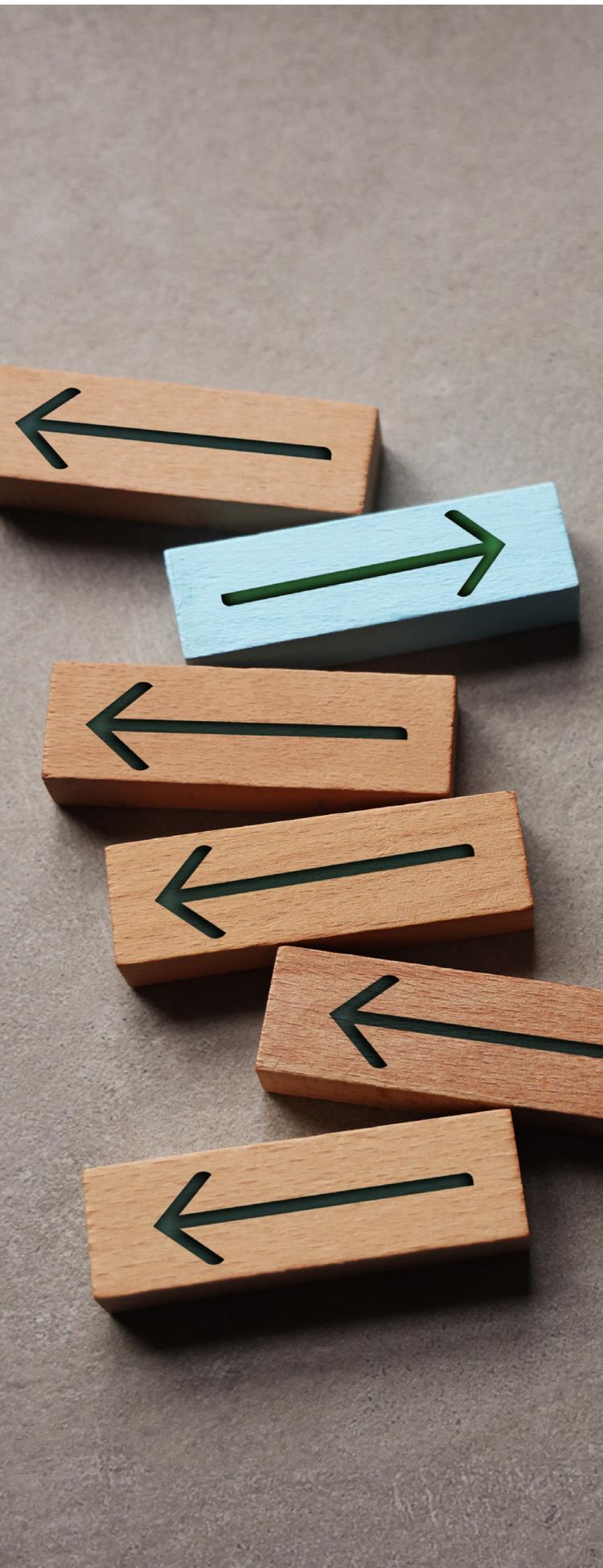
### Perpetrator 'navigators' to guide and motivate engagement with services

'Navigator' systems are an emerging area of practice whereby perpetrators are paired with suitably qualified individuals (usually a social worker) who assists them in understanding their behaviour, navigating the service system, and (in some cases) providing motivation and encouragement.

#### Key example(s):

- Caledonian System Justice Social Workers (Scotland)
- [InTouch – Motivation for Change program](#) (VIC)





## Our approach

This project utilised the James Martin Institute’s unique collaborative model that engages government and academia to work cooperatively on challenging policy issues. The core project team comprised of Institute staff, a university-based researcher, and government representatives. Advice from an expert advisory group (EAG) – comprised of academics, policy and practice experts, and NSW Government representatives – was gathered and considered through consultations. While the Institute managed the process around the project and took leadership over its final design, the content is a product of genuine collaboration between those involved.

## Limitations and further work

This research project involved a review and collation of existing research, policy, and practice; it did not attempt to generate entirely novel knowledge or conduct primary research. Its probative value was limited to indicating promising positive practice in perpetrator interventions. Moreover, the scope of the report specifically excluded detailed examination of domestic violence reoffending in NSW and existing NSW programs and responses.

The report also did not provide detailed data on the financial implications of the approaches proposed, as these will be contingent on broader programming and institutional settings.

The options and strategies to generate and sustain a suitably trained and skilled workforce were outside the scope of the report but should be carefully considered going forward.

The report was intended to provide an evidence base for policymaking in NSW as part of a broader process of sector and community consultation, in-depth analysis of the particular circumstances around domestic violence reoffending in the state and its various communities, and co-design.

It is important to note specifically that this research project excluded direct consideration of First Nations perpetrators and related services and interventions. Addressing this topic appropriately would require its own research process that comprehensively recognises and engages with the specific context, dynamics, and voice of First Nations communities themselves.

While the report focused on reoffending incidents within the immediate post-offence period, it is important to recognise that domestic violence is a patterned behaviour, including through coercive control, that requires a similarly patterned response.

## Contributors & Acknowledgements

The project this summary report reflects was delivered by a joint project team managed by the James Martin Institute for Public Policy under our collaborative model. A range of experts, practitioners and policymakers from Australia and internationally were also consulted at various points during the project.

We would also like to thank the following members of the expert advisory group, who contributed their expertise to the project at various points. This report does not necessarily represent the views of these individuals or their organisations.

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## Explanatory statement on authorship

The James Martin Institute for Public Policy is a nonpartisan, independent research organisation which does not adopt an institutional view on specific policy issues. This report summarises the calibrated view of the project team, which operated under a highly collaborative model. Its view was formed on the basis of an assessment of relevant academic research, stakeholder consultations, and engagement with relevant experts, including an expert advisory group (EAG).

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