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Forensic Services for Medical Examiner and Coroner Offices Webinar Series

Session 3: Autopsy Services

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Disclaimer

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Today's Agenda: Autopsy Services

- Locum Tenens, Dr. Jonathan Lucas
- Pathologists' Assistants and Autopsy, Dr. Lou Mendes-Kramer
- Q&A Segment



Locum Tenens

Dr. Jonathan Lucas, MD
San Diego County Medical Examiner's Office
San Diego, CA

Dr. Jonathan Lucas, MD

- Chief Medical Examiner – San Diego County, California
- Chief Medical Examiner – Los Angeles County, California (2017-2022)
- Over 5,000 autopsies
- MD – University of Nevada School of Medicine
- Pathology – University of California, Los Angeles Department of Pathology
- Forensic Pathology – Office of Chief Medical Examiner, New York City



Why Use Locums?

- Filling staffing gaps due to vacancies, leaves, or surges
- Maintain continuous service without long-term commitment
- Budget neutral: fund through vacancy savings

Pay Models

- Per diem: Flat daily rate, predictable cost
- Per case: Incentivizes productivity, but could affect quality, less predictable
- Hybrid: Base rate plus a per case basis



Microsoft 365 Stock Photo

San Diego County, California

- About 3,900 cases per year
- National Association of Medical Examiners (NAME) exam equivalents (2,078/year)
- Funding for 11.75 Forensic Pathologist Full-Time Equivalents (FTEs)
 - Currently 5 vacancies



Image provided by the San Diego County Medical Examiner's Office

San Diego County, California *(continued)*

- Use 2 autopsies + 3 external exams as daily workload (2.75) (“widget”)
 - = known \$ per widget
- Budgeted amount / widget = # contractor days



Image provided by the San Diego County Medical Examiner's Office

Contracting Considerations

- Open vs. scheduled solicitation
- Travel, housing, and licensing costs
- Malpractice coverage responsibilities
- Contract length
- Escalators and renewal terms
- Onboarding time
- Years of experience



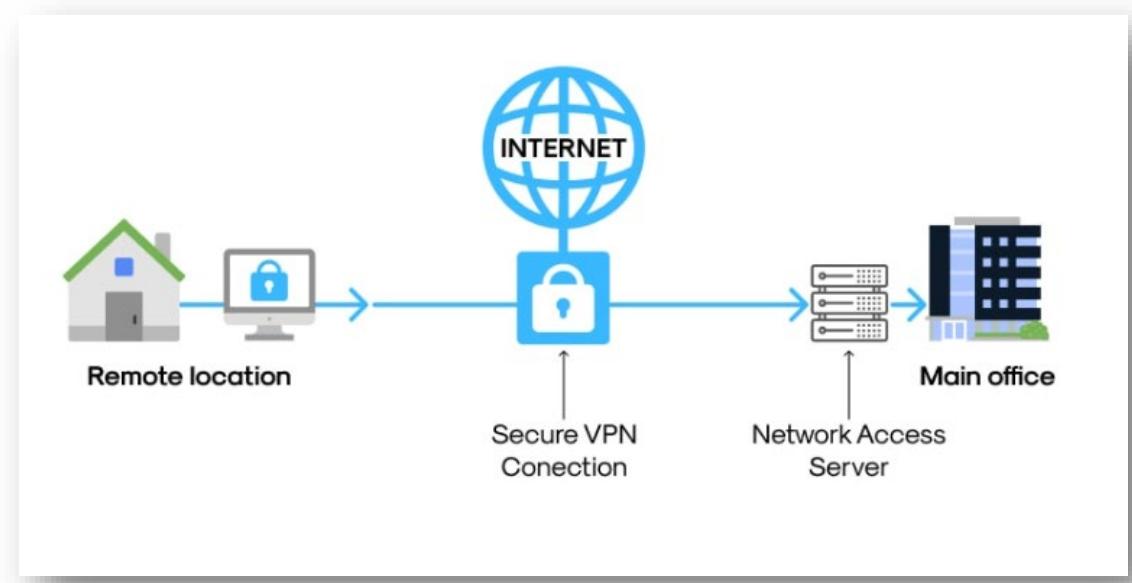
<https://ebaengineering.com/understanding-contract-language-words-to-watch-for-in-a-e-contracts/>

Assigning Cases to Locums

- Include homicides(?)
- Match complexity to experience
- Avoid high-profile or media-sensitive cases unless necessary

Access to Case Management Systems and Other Programs

- Remote report signing
- Access to postmortem imaging
- Communication with investigations, staff, and family
- Review of toxicology, histology, and ancillary testing



<https://www.wallarm.com/what/remote-work-security>

Testimony and Follow Up

- Consider local prosecutor/public defender needs
- Who pays for testimony time?
- Subpoena compliance and scheduling
- Internal staff liaison



<https://wausaupilotandreview.com/2022/10/18/arizona-man-sentenced-in-central-wisconsin-drug-trafficking-money-laundering-scheme>

Lessons and Tips

- Vetting: references, prior experience
- Orientation: policies, systems, and expectations
- Staff introductions
- Building trusted pool for recurring needs



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Pathologists' Assistants and Autopsy

Dr. Lou Mendes-Kramer, PhD, PA(ASCP)^{cm}
American Association of Pathologists' Assistants (AAPA)

Dr. Lou Mendes-Kramer, PhD, PA(ASCP)^{cm}

VeraLucia “Lou” Mendes-Kramer is the Director of the Pathologists’ Assistant Program at Wayne State University in Detroit, Michigan. In addition to her academic role, she works as a locums Forensic Pathologists’ Assistant, serving medical examiner and coroner offices across the country. Lou also chairs the Forensic Task Force for the American Association of Pathologists’ Assistants, where she leads initiatives to advance the role of Pathologists’ Assistants in forensic settings. Lou is committed to removing barriers and expanding opportunities for Pathologists’ Assistants in this specialized field. Her dedication to education and clinical innovation reflects her vision of fostering a more inclusive and forward-thinking forensic community.



Objectives

- Define Pathologists' Assistant scope of practice
- Describe the history of Pathologists' Assistants
- Distinguish between Pathologists' Assistant and Physician's Assistant (Associate)
- Showcase highly specialized Pathologists' Assistant training/certification
- Explain the current models of Pathologists' Assistants in forensic science
- Identify the types of autopsy cases Pathologists' Assistant can perform
- Outline how Pathologists' Assistant can help the Medical Examiner/Coroner (ME/C) office

What is a Pathologists' Assistant?

- A certified Pathologists' Assistant (PA) is an allied health professional trained in surgical, autopsy, and forensic pathology
- We are NOT the same as Physician Associates (Assistants)



Image provided by the presenter

What is a Pathologists' Assistant? *(continued)*

- Pathologists' Assistants provide anatomic pathology services under the direction and supervision of a Forensic Pathologist
- A Pathologists' Assistant **cannot** replace a Forensic Pathologist

Pathologists' Assistant Timeline

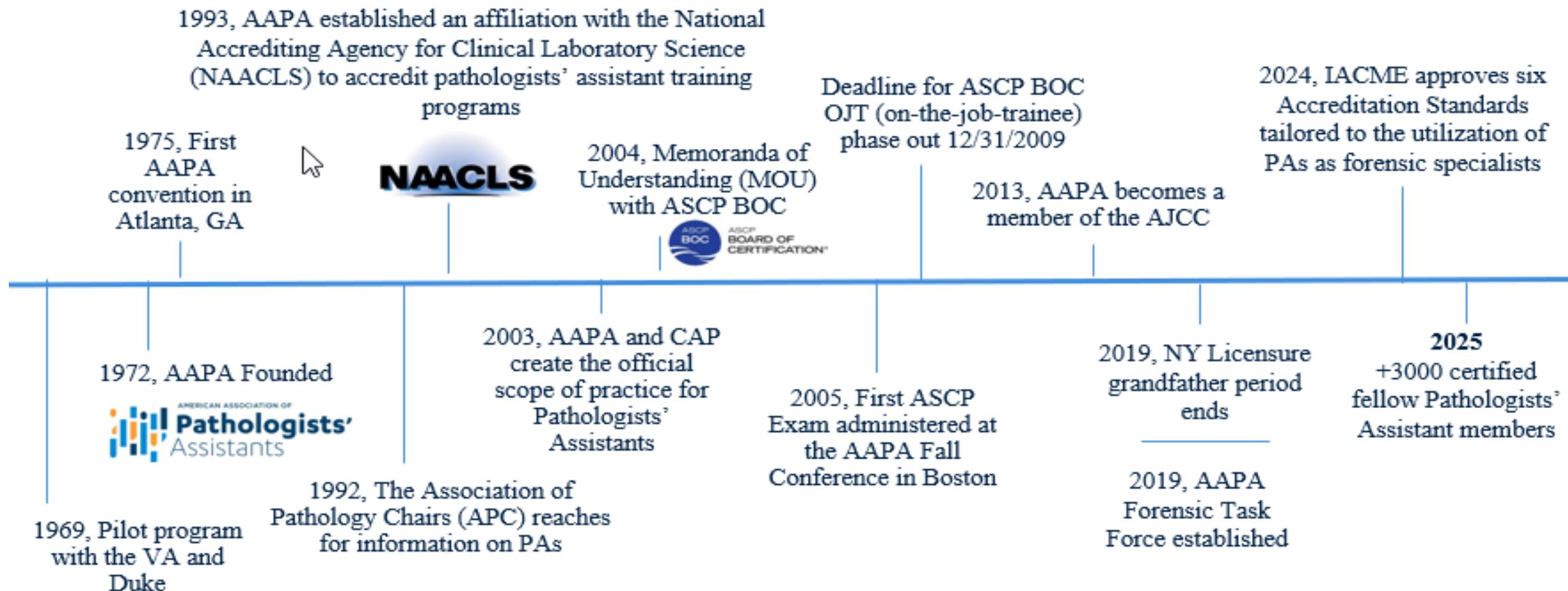


Image provided by the presenter

Pathologists' Assistant vs. Physician Associate (Assistant)



<https://naacls.org/>



<https://www.ascp.org/content/Board-of-Certification>

- Pathologists' Assistants: PA (ASCP)^{cm}
- Path A programs accredited by the National Accreditation Agency for Clinical Laboratory Sciences (NAACLS)
- American Society for Clinical Pathology Board of Certification (ASCP-BOC)

- Physician's Associate (Assistant): PA-C
- PA program accredited by the Accreditation Review Commission on Education for the Physician Assistant (ARC-PA)
- Physician Assistant National Certifying Examination[®] (PANCE)



<https://www.arc-pa.org/>



<https://www.nccpa.net/>

Pathologists' Assistant vs. Physician Associate (Assistant) (continued)

Pathologists' Assistant Training	Physician Associate Training
Foundation in the theory and hands-on application of anatomical, surgical, and autopsy pathology	Emphasis on primary care in ambulatory clinics, medical practices, and acute or long-term care facilities
Clinical Rotations: Surgical Pathology (hospital) Autopsy Pathology (hospital) Forensic Autopsy Pathology (ME/C offices)	Clinical Rotations: Family Medicine Internal Medicine Obstetrics and Gynecology Pediatrics General Surgery Emergency Medicine Psychiatry

Pathologists' Assistant Training and Education

- Master's degree programs
 - Full-time = 2 years
 - Part-time = up to 39 months
- 11-12 months of hands-on clinical training in surgical and autopsy pathology
- All NAACLS-accredited programs train their students in forensic autopsy techniques and forensic pathology

Pathologists' Assistant Training Programs

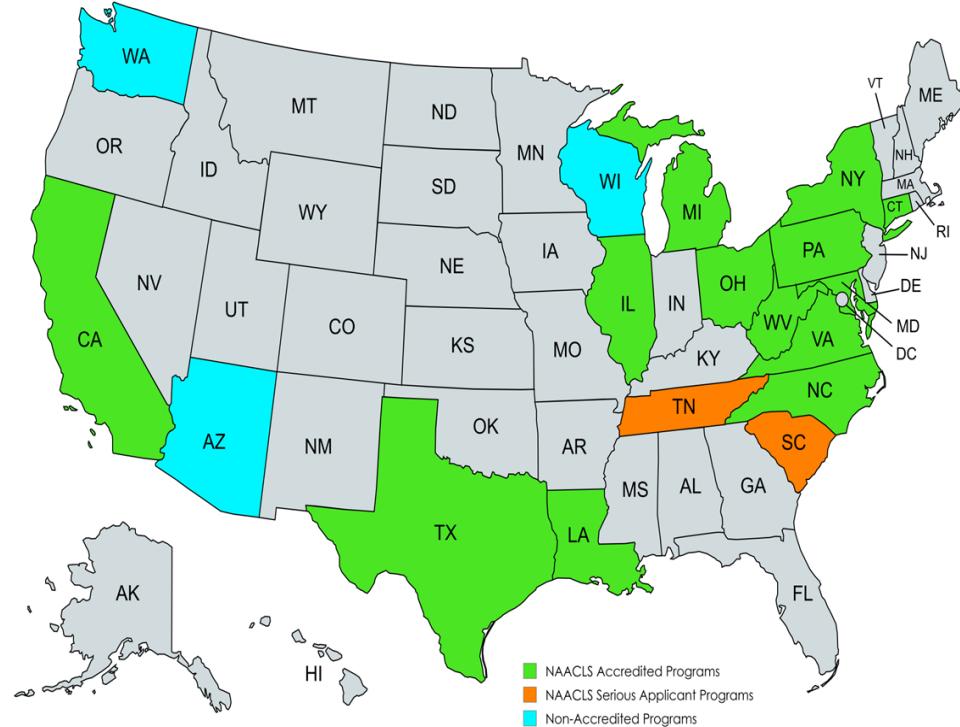


Image provided by the presenter
https://www.pathassist.org/page/aboutus_nacls?&terms=accredited+and+programs

NAACLS Accredited Programs in the US and Canada

- 15 accredited in the US
- 2 Serious Applicant status
- 3 non-accredited / non-Serious Applicant status (yet)
- 4 accredited in Canada

Pathologists' Assistant Scope of Practice?

- A Pathologists' Assistant is a highly trained, certified allied healthcare professional who is qualified by academic and practical training to provide various services in anatomic pathology **under the direction and supervision** of a licensed, Board Certified or Board Eligible Anatomic Pathologist.
- Much like Physician Associates (Assistants), Pathologists' Assistants function as mid-level practitioners and specialize in the field of anatomic pathology including **forensic pathology**.
- Pathologists' Assistants work under their attending Pathologist to help determine a cause and mechanism of death in the autopsy suite.

Direct Supervision of Pathologists' Assistant



<https://theiacme.com/>

“Autopsies performed by Pathologists’ Assistants shall be directly supervised by a board-certified forensic pathologist who shall sign off on all reports. Direct supervision includes the presence of the board-certified pathologist at the outset and conclusion of the autopsy.”

Source: IACME Standards (2024)

Direct Supervision is “supervision done in person, where the forensic pathologists is readily available and physically present throughout the autopsy to give both supervision and guidance to the Pathologists’ Assistant.”

Source: NAME proposed Standards (2022)



<https://name.memberclicks.net/>

IACME Standards



Focus on the utilization of ASCP-certified Pathologists' Assistants for performing non-criminal and non-suspicious forensic autopsies under the direct supervision of a Forensic Pathologist.



Recognizes Pathologists' Assistants as physician extenders whose overall training and education can be utilized to address the shortage of Forensic Pathologists.

Pathologists' Assistant Scope of Practice?

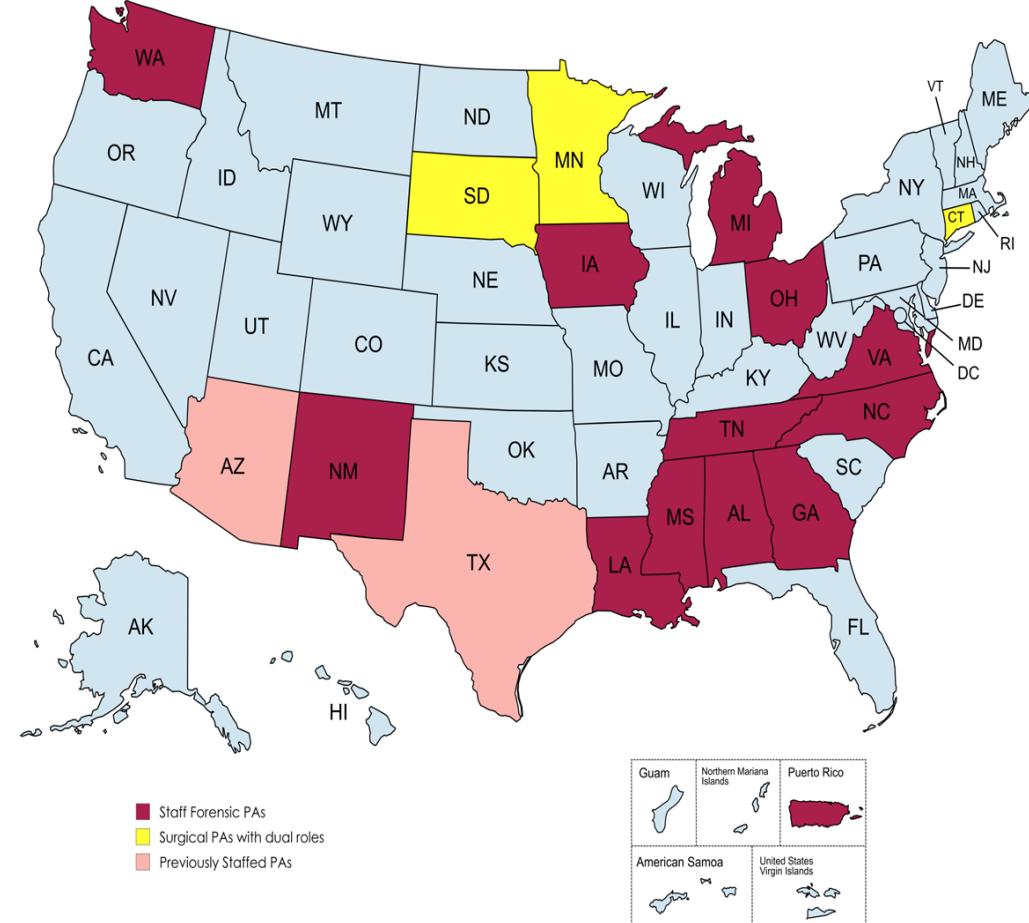
In the forensic setting, a Pathologists' Assistant performs:

- External examination
- Evisceration
- Organ block dissection
- Tissue sampling for microscopy
- Toxicology sampling
- Gross photography
- Preliminary/Final autopsy reports
- Medical record review
- Education of medical students, residents, and autopsy technicians
- Management and autopsy floor supervision
- Death scene investigation

All responsibilities
performed under
appropriate supervision
by staff Forensic
Pathologists

Practicing Forensic PAs

- Staff PAs
- Surgical PAs with ME/C office overflow duties
- Locum Tenens PAs
- PA scope of practice evolved with dedicated office needs



Created with mapchart.net

Image provided by the presenter

Types of Cases Assigned to PAs

- Natural Deaths
- Overdoses (ODs)
- Motor Vehicle Collision (MVCs)
- Suicides
- Drownings
- Inspections
- Medical Record Reviews

How Can PAs Help the ME/C Office?

Staffing a ME/C office with a PA can help both the office and pathologists in:

- Managing courtroom responsibilities
- Completing reports in a timely manner
- Prioritizing complex cases by the Forensic Pathologist
- Maintaining (or performing/attaining) quality improvement/quality assurance
- Assisting with research/data collection
- Medicolegal death investigations
- Ensuring staff safety and training
- Outreach and community engagement

When in doubt ...Try it out!

- Is a PA the right staff for your office?
- All office and administrative staff should be on the same page about hiring/trying the services of a PA
- Consider trying a locum tenens PA
 - Forensic Pathology Services
 - Pay per case or per day

When in doubt ...Try it out! *(continued)*

- It's a GO!
 - Make sure the legislation of your state allows someone other than a medical doctor to perform autopsy work
 - Review recent American Association of Pathologists' Assistants (AAPA) salary survey information for your state
 - Reach out to the AAPA Forensic Task Force (or me) for assistance with developing a job description
 - Advertise the job with the AAPA or reach out to the directors of accrediting programs and ask them to disseminate the job posting

When in doubt ...Try it out! *(continued)*

- It's a GO!
 - When interviewing:
 - Make sure that the candidate is ASCP certified or eligible to become certified
 - Ask specific questions regarding the extent of their forensic and autopsy training
 - Reach out to the director (or previous employer) of the graduating program and ask for specific information about the forensic/autopsy curriculum and hands-on autopsy training the candidate experienced

Looking to the Future

- Development of robust standards regarding the utilization of PAs in the forensic setting
- Accrediting and professional agencies (e.g., IACME, NAME, AAPA, NAACLS) develop a forensic-specific scope of practice
- Funding that supports additional training for PAs in forensic science (e.g., fellowships)



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Q&A Segment



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