



Green to Our Corps

Official newsletter of the Greenest Region Corps



**Greenest
Region
Corps**

GRC NEWS INSIDE THIS ISSUE:

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- A New (Virtual) Normal
- COVID Conversations
- Racial Equity Discussions

Welcome to the third edition of the *Green to Our Corps* newsletter. We believe everyone can agree that these past months have been packed. In this edition, we address how our Corps has been changed and shaped by the ongoing pandemic, racial injustices, and everything in between. Though longer than other editions, we felt that these topics deserved the space to be explored thoroughly.

The topics discussed are ongoing conversations that will remain important to the Corps and its future. As we work towards sustainability in our region, we strive to do so in a way that ensures health, happiness, and equity for all.

COVID-19 and the Corps

The COVID-19 health pandemic has ushered us into unprecedented times. Disruptions have occurred in almost every facet of life, including AmeriCorps service. Fortunately, most of our Corps was able to quickly transition to remote work in mid-March and continue work on projects for our respective communities. Many GRCorps members noted that communications were at the forefront of their immediate tasks. With in-person events cancelled or postponed, finding ways to engage with the community was paramount. Corps member Charmaine John helped the Village of Northbrook share positive sustainability related communications in addition to putting together a Virtual Earth Week program. At Cook County's Department of Environment and Sustainability, Corps member Julia Linares moved what was supposed to be in-person Earth Week activities online. She stated:

"Since mid-March, I have been working to come up with creative avenues of engagement in this now socially distanced world. One example of this is Cook County Department of Environment and Sustainability's switch from in-person Earth Day events to an online Earth Month, featuring different weekly themes highlighting actions residents can do from home to help reduce carbon emissions. These actions focused on not only helping our climate, but also helping residents save money in a time flux with financial concerns."

Within our own organization communication was crucial. Corps Member Katya Obrez was able to help with GRCorps communication materials by creating recruitment content for the next cycle of GRCorps, keeping in mind that this recruitment season would take place solely online. She also helped to keep GRCorps members engaged in virtual learning by transitioning trainings online. These workshops focused on a variety of sustainable topics for our current GRCorps members to continue their exploration of the sustainability realm.

Disruptions in services have impacted many local governments, and municipalities were tasked with the challenge of creating more safe and efficient operating protocols. Corps member Ivy Klee at SWALCO noted that regional waste, recycling, and compost services had been interrupted at the onset of the global health pandemic and she needed to be a liaison between her agency and other organizations such as schools and businesses that utilized waste services. She explained:

"Since the COVID-19 pandemic started, the world of waste and recycling has had ups and downs to deal with in an already creative and problem solving industry. With systems out of whack and supply chains broken, we are trying our best to work with the waste industry to communicate the new messages & information regarding COVID-19 protocol and also provide alternatives to our residents if programs are shut down or on hold."

COVID-19 and the Corps

The pandemic has brought to the forefront the importance of essential workers and she hopes that the gratitude and support expressed for our sanitation personnel continues beyond this moment. Other Corps members were more directly involved in creating COVID-19 content for their host sites. The Metropolitan Mayors Caucus collaborates closely with many municipalities and mayors in the Chicago Metropolitan Region, and for that reason, Corps member Cheryl Scott made COVID-19 resource webpages for the Caucus. As the state of Illinois continues to update rules and regulations, Cheryl is a crucial resource for the Caucus, she shared:

"I also help update the website with resources that Mayors and municipal leaders have requested, such as sample face mask ordinances to protect residents, guidance on first responders obtaining PPE, and I revise the site each day after Gov. Pritzker's daily press briefing."

Corps members have been able to make an impact no matter where they are. Corps member Haley Crim was able to help her host site all the way from her home state of Maryland! In an effort to provide residents with the crucial face coverings needed to slow the spread of the coronavirus, the Village of Park Forest hosted giveaways of mask making kits that included fabric from T-shirts leftover from previous events. Haley enjoyed being able to aid her community sharing:

"I was able to make posters, graphics for social media, and instruction sheets to go with the mask kits from where I'm quarantining in Maryland in order to free up time for colleagues in Park Forest to assemble and give out the kits."



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A New (Virtual) Normal

Earth Day

Due to the pandemic, the GRCorps worked quickly to shift planned in-person events at host sites to collective online engagement opportunities. For the 50th Anniversary of Earth Day, the GRCorps held an online webinar to celebrate and educate fellow AmeriCorps groups throughout the region on different sustainability topics. Four GRCorps members, Cheryl Scott, Haley Crim, Ivy Klee and Julia Linares along with one of the GRCorps program coordinators, Erin Newman, presented online to over 60 participants! The presentation included an introduction to the Greenest Region Corps as well as the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency and the significance of both in the Chicagoland region. Members' presentations touched on the different projects that they were working on throughout their term as well as the different fields within sustainability, such as energy, waste and work practices.



7 THINGS YOU CAN DO FOR THE PLANET DURING A PANDEMIC

Greenest Region Compact



The GRCorps also collaborated on an Earth Day flyer including seven things that people can do to celebrate the 50th Anniversary of Earth Day while also sheltering in place during the coronavirus pandemic.

To view the Earth Day webinar presentation slides or download a copy of the Earth Day flyer, go to <https://mayorscaucus.org/earth-day-2020/>.



Climate Trainings

The GRCorps had two virtual training sessions from home with Professor Warren Lavey & Professor Holly Rosencranz, both of whom are instructors at the University of Illinois (Champaign-Urbana & Chicago). Warren & Holly both work to educate medical professionals on how to take action on climate change and sustainability issues in the world of medicine. At the first training in March, GRCorps members learned about how they can take action on climate & public health issues in the field of sustainability. The second training held in April included a discussion and activity surrounding mainstreaming sustainability. The training committee sought out these meaningful trainings in order to connect current events to our service. Exploring the intersections of public health and climate change was relevant because of COVID-19 and seeing the links between sustainability and the current public health crisis. Mainstreaming sustainability was valuable because it relates to how we communicate the value of our work even amidst the current crises that governments are facing- seeing sustainability as a step towards community resilience within a variety of local priorities. The GRCorps thanks Warren & Holly for their enthusiasm to engage in conversation and is grateful for the wealth of knowledge from each training!

The public health implications of climate change are evident and most people have seen climate impacts during their lifetime: major weather disasters increasing, natural landscapes changing drastically, water levels rising, and air pollution worsening air quality. It's no coincidence that these problems not only affect the physical environment, but also the physical health of people. Part of our conversation addressed looking at climate change as a public health crisis and how we can still acknowledge this in the face of a world-wide public health crisis. Warren & Holly asked the GRCorps to participate in a simulation based education activity that they lead in their workshops with public health students at the University of Illinois. They gave each member a hypothetical patient with hypothetical symptoms and the GRCorps had to determine if there were any climate or environmental problems causing the symptoms of the ill patient. This exercise demonstrated that the environment plays a big role in influencing public health.



CONTINUED LEARNING:

For a case study on mainstreaming climate change in municipal government, [click here](#).

To further explore the climate change-public health-equity nexus, [click here](#).

Climate Trainings (cont.)

The second training on mainstreaming sustainability, the act of weaving and integrating sustainability into all facets of society and its systems, included another critical thinking conversation. Our group looked at the ways in which sustainability has become more mainstreamed over the years and also ways in which it is currently still in the process of becoming more included in different sectors within society. We discussed how GRCorps members see sustainability already mainstreamed in their host sites, areas where that could be improved from current efforts and also suggested some ideas for the future. When looking at the GRCorps program as a whole, we thought that it was wonderful to see the progress and commitment to sustainability from our current host sites. This to us demonstrated sustainability was being mainstreamed and becoming more of a priority in government agencies. However, there is still a lot of work to be done to mainstream sustainability throughout Chicagoland and within our current host sites.

Sustainable Transportation Training

During sustainable transportation training in June, GRCorps members split into groups to figure out how to reduce emissions by 75% in the Chicago area by 2030. The groups found it was difficult to get to a 75% decrease, without making drastic reductions in the number of cars on the road, large increases in electric vehicles (EVs), and other changes that might not realistically happen quickly.

Doug Lavey and Daniel Comeaux, two graduates of the Harvard Kennedy School of Government Master of Public Policy Program, led the sustainable transportation training and helped the GRCorps through the exercise to reduce emissions.



DANIEL COMEAUX

Daniel is a recent graduate from the Harvard Kennedy School of Government Master of Public Policy Program. Now, he is an Associate Policy Analyst for the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning, focusing on transportation policy. Previously, Daniel worked for the Civic Consulting Alliance, supporting clients across the Chicago region including the Chicago Transit Authority and the Cook County Department of Transportation & Highways.

Sustainable Transportation Training (cont.)

One group came close to the 75% goal and achieved a 72% reduction. To get there, the group had to assume that 50% of vehicles on the road would be EVs, when approximately 1% are currently EVs in Illinois; only 2% of vehicle trips in the future would involve one occupant, when currently 41% of vehicle trips in Chicagoland involve people driving alone instead of riding with two or more people; and transit ridership in the Chicago region would have to nearly quadruple from 635 million rides per year (before the pandemic) to 2.51 billion rides per year, which would make for extremely crowded rides on the trains and buses. Overall, the exercise showed the GRCorps that although governments may set ambitious greenhouse gas reduction targets, finding a realistic way to reach those goals proves difficult.

At the training, Doug and Daniel presented on transportation's impact in Illinois, how transportation has changed during COVID-19, and how it might be altered in the future, before presenting on their grad school theses.

Daniel spoke about his policy analysis for the New York City Department of Transportation, in which he evaluated curb usage and brought forth recommendations for reallocating the curb space to promote sustainability. For example, some of the street parking in New York City is free, which does not incentivize people to take public transit. Daniel proposed other uses for the curb space (e.g., bike corrals, bike lanes and parklets) and also suggested that cities like New York could stop offering free parking.

Doug talked about his capstone project on integrated and smart transportation systems for Illinois, which involved partnering with the Illinois Autonomous Vehicle Association. Through his research, he found that intelligent transportation systems (e.g., sensors in vehicles that detect a pedestrian walkway or a stoplight) would be a better investment right now for Illinois, when compared to autonomous vehicles. He also drove home the point about transportation projects being expensive and difficult to prioritize by asking the GRCorps to guess the cost of installing a stoplight, building one mile of road, and constructing one block of sidewalk, curb and gutter.



DOUG LAVEY

Doug graduated from the Harvard Kennedy School of Government Master of Public Policy Program in 2020. Additionally, he recently completed his law degree at Northwestern University Pritzker School of Law with a focus on technology law.

COVID Conversations

Living in unprecedented times, we desired to chronicle how our members' service changed during a global pandemic. We joined Brittanie G. of Evanston, Maya D. of Waukegan, and Robin G. of Hawthorn Woods for a COVID Conversation.

COVID Conversations: Brittanie G.

How has working at home changed how you approach sustainability?

In my role, there's been a lot of attention on how people can stay actively engaged in climate action and sustainability while being at home. We no longer have in-person meetings, you can't go to conferences or do communal outdoor activities. So, we really have to be thinking about how we communicate important climate topics and also how we're implementing policies at a local, municipal level – and also making sure that we are doing that in a way that's appropriate and sensitive to the ongoing pandemic. People are very scared and worried in this time. There's a lot of different pieces in the balance that people are having to think about, like not only the climate crisis, but more people are now facing unprecedented unemployment levels, they have to worry about their kids being at home and doing e-learning, and that's a challenge. More people have to be worrying about how they're going to pay their bills. Especially with businesses, I've been working a lot with our sustainable business program. Businesses are just trying to survive. There are so many different crises that people are thinking about, so we need to be very mindful of how we approach our topics and the work that's important to us. Everything is so interconnected, and we want people to see that, but also be mindful of their pressing and immediate concerns.

Also just in terms of the way that I've been thinking about sustainability is that in Evanston, our Climate Action and Resilience Plan focuses not only on climate mitigation (reducing our greenhouse gases), but also resilience. A sustainable community looks like one that obviously is taking steps to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions, but also is a community that prioritizes servicing their community equitably with programs and policies to help their residents and community members live healthy lives.



COVID Conversations: Brittanie G.

But now more than ever, I need to think about the work that I'm doing, is it really impacting the community that I'm here to serve? Am I reaching them where they need to be reached? Are the things that we are working on currently resonating? Are we upholding our commitment to amplify the voices of our most vulnerable residents and taking steps to decrease inequity within our city? We're here to serve the public, and so that should be our first priority.



How has working at home changed how you approach sustainability in your personal life?



In terms of how I think about my own sustainability at home, it's given me the opportunity to explore the ways my family can be more sustainable. We started composting this food and yard waste season, so that's been fun. I like to show them what I've been learning at the city. Also, my brother and I have been getting crafty lately and doing DIY projects. My brother made a bench out of old wood outside. I made a makeup storage container out of old hair product containers.



Besides the location of your office changing, how has your work itself shifted?

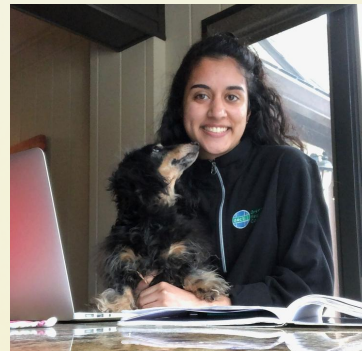


At my site location, there are always a ton of things going on in the Office of Sustainability. For me, I don't think any of my direct tasks have changed to be solely COVID-19 related. One of the projects I was working on has been put on pause because of the implications of COVID-19. I had been working on the Sustain Evanston program. The program was launched last year by another fellow GRCorps member. However, it's on hold because businesses are trying to figure out finances and stay afloat. We thought it was best to delay this year's launch while people are dealing with more immediate concerns. Some of the things I've been able to do is touch on projects that haven't been able to get as much attention. Our team has been working on policies related to the plastic bag ban ordinance that needs some reworking. We've been looking at how other communities have done it, trying to come up with a way to implement it, and coming up with branding and marketing ideas for it. Additionally, I've been getting to look at data that I'm not as familiar with, such as data for EVs and benchmarking for energy and water. That is how my work has shifted.

To check out the full interview, [click here](#).

COVID Conversations: Maya D.

How has working at home changed how you view sustainability?



One of the big things that I think about when I think about sustainability work and my job here in Waukegan is fostering a community focused on environmental justice, health, and equity while maintaining a healthy natural world. When I think about COVID and public health in general, it makes me understand how important building community resiliency is now and will be in the future. And the reality that everything intersects, like how public health disparities are worsened in communities experiencing long-term air pollution. The current crisis is making me think more about integrating all the different facets of sustainability and how it affects many fields. Now is a really important time to get the message out to everyone who may have previously thought of sustainability as just “tree hugging” that it is much more- sustainability is about making communities resilient and healthy.

How has your work shifted since you began working from home?

I mean it honestly hasn't shifted that much. My biggest project is writing the sustainability plan, which because I already spent the first half of this program in Waukegan learning about the community, I can write from home based on those past experiences. Obviously, it would be easier to do some community initiatives if I was still there, like our planned Earth Day events. So, for those projects that are more community focused and shorter term, we had to just be comfortable with pushing them off until next year. The reality of my work is that certain projects are paused on the planning phase and having to be okay with that until things are better. Overall, it has not changed a lot.

For the sustainability plan, when did you start working on it and how have you been going about developing it?

I basically started working on the plan as soon as I began working in Waukegan because in order to make a sustainability plan that is relevant to the city, you must know the city itself. Not being from the Chicago region, I had heard of Waukegan but was not totally familiar. I began learning about the city by investigating what environmental initiatives were already taking place. I attended meetings concerning the lakefront, toured different facilities, like the water plant, and met with the city engineer concerning the capital improvement plan. I focused my attention on learning about those projects and working to integrate their connections to sustainability. To further help in establishing the plan, I received input from the community through an online survey that was constructed using the Greenest Region Compact (GRC). In it, citizens could choose their priorities and could list their top strategies within those categories. That was open for 1 ½-2 months. After collecting the community input and analyzing the results, I began writing the plan using the GRC categories from the framework and using the strategies to combine the work already being done in Waukegan and goals for the future.

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COVID Conversations: Maya D.



What did the community prioritize in the survey?



The top priorities were economic development, land and lakefront, and sustainable communities, which I found very interesting as it is consistent with the triple bottom line of sustainability, which focuses on economic development, equity, and natural resources. I felt that the results encompassed sustainability really well.



To check out the full interview, [click here.](#)

COVID Conversations: Robin G.

How has working at home changed how you view sustainability?



From the moment everything started shutting down, I became interested in how this would affect the emissions and carbon output on both a national and global scale. Not everything that I was hearing represented the positives of decreased emissions; some predict that factories will open and use much more fuel and resources than before to make up for lost time. Despite this, now people have a taste for working from home and there might be a genuine shift toward a new way of working. This is causing a dramatic change toward what we view as necessary for the workplace and is helping to change the view of what is normal in life.

The entire world coming together to address a global problem gives me some hope that the world can do the same in the future. In living memory there are no situations that have required a global response as powerful as the reaction to the virus. Hopefully, the issues that have been revealed through the virus can be addressed and the tools of our collective response can be a means of uniting against another common enemy - unsustainable living.

How has your work shifted since you began working from home?



Mostly, my interaction with coworkers has been reduced. Currently, I am filling out goals and strategies for Hawthorn Woods's sustainability plan. Before, I was able to walk down the hall and get feedback and now that has shifted to email correspondence. That has increased the time it takes to hear back and decreased the volume of feedback I receive.

For the sustainability plan, when did you start working on it and how have you been developing it?



The development of the sustainability plan for Hawthorn Woods relies heavily on the Greenest Region Compact and the designation process for the village to be designated as a Audubon international Green Community. These processes both cover extensive resources and understanding of how sustainability processes work in the Chicago region. As the plan gets further into development, it will go through processes of review with a citizen sustainability committee and adjusted with the results of a sustainability survey that had been given out to community members this past spring.

To check out the full interview, [click here](#).

Racial Equity Discussions in the GRCorps

Building Racial Equity in our Corps

The GRCorps program is currently taking steps to create a more racially equitable program. From within, we have carefully examined our recruitment and hiring practices and have made efforts to expand our networks to reach a more racially equitable pool of sustainability professionals. While we have just begun to scratch the surface of equitable hiring practices, we are committed to continually learning, improving, and critically assessing where and how we post applications for the program. We have also taken a closer look at the communities served by the Greenest Region Corps. As a team, we have discussed the barriers and systemic obstacles that prevent many Chicago-area communities of color from participating in our program, or even prioritizing sustainability within their communities. With this in mind, the GRCorps has dedicated one position in the 2020-2021 service year to focus on developing more intentional relationships with communities of color in the Chicago region and building capacity for sustainability work in those communities that are most vulnerable to the adverse effects of Climate Change. We again acknowledge that this is just a first step in the direction of becoming a more equitable program, and look forward to continuing to learn and expand our efforts in the future.

Further, GRCorps members have created a Racial Equity Discussion Group to create a space for sharing ideas and having conversations about racial inequity in our professional and personal experiences. This group is an opportunity to create a necessary dialogue to address and acknowledge where we see racial inequity and what are ways in which we can help create a more equitable environment, both within the GRCorps, within our personal lives and within sustainability as a whole. By examining and discussing a variety of resources and topics that pertain to racial equity, we hope that our members' takeaway new knowledge and perspectives, and cultivate thoughtful action. Participation in this group is bi-weekly and GRCorps members can join in if they please. This is a working group, and we hope to carry this discussion going forward with the next GRCorps term.

Racial Justice Training

Racial Equity and the Role of Municipal Government Training

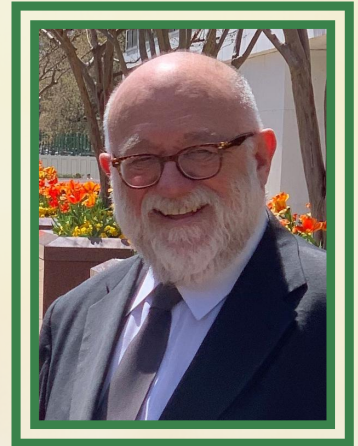
On Tuesday, July 14, GRCorps members had the opportunity to participate in a training entitled "Racial Equity and the Role of Municipal Government" with Former Mayor of the Village of Park Forest, John A. Ostenburg. Recent events within our nation have sparked questions and conversation about what steps can be taken to improve racial equity within our cities. Our 12 GRC host sites are diverse places and it is important to understand how local governments can identify inequities within their operations and implement actions towards a more livable city for their most vulnerable residents.

Racial Equity Discussions in the GRCorps

Racial Equity and the Role of Municipal Government Training (cont.)

Former Mayor Ostenburg noted that Park Forest, a south suburb of a little over 20,000 people, was a planned community. The village was created with white veterans from World War II in mind. As with many communities in that time period, there were multiple restrictions that barred non-white residents from opportunities. The four areas of inequity that Former Mayor Ostenburg discussed were housing, healthcare, employment, and social circumstances. African Americans have been historically barred from acquiring and retaining real estate. Federal red-lining practices, racially restrictive covenants (or refusing to let certain groups purchase or lease homes in that area), and large home down payments are reasons for this. Within the healthcare space, access to affordable healthcare and less healthcare facilities in reasonable distances from their places of residence add to inequity. In terms of employment, African Americans experience a high percentage of unemployment and are often in high-risk job situations.

Municipalities have the responsibility to make their communities more sustainable, livable, and equitable for their residents. Mayor Ostenburg shared some steps that are helpful in starting or continuing righting the past wrongs of inequity that governments have played a role in. Steps to advance equity include policies, procedures, and practices within the government. It is important to update policies that may be burdening vulnerable residents such as zoning laws, and significant community input is necessary in the decision making process. Local practices must be audited. And procedures, the operational methods to implement policies, should identify clear goals, objectives, and measurable outcomes. A helpful tool Mayor Ostenburg used while serving the Village of Park Forest included components of a racial equity tool from the Government Alliance on Race & Equity; they are a national network of government working to achieve racial equity and advance opportunities for all.



CONTINUED LEARNING:

To access the toolkit from the Government Alliance on Race & Equity, [click here](#).

For the National League of Cities Municipal Action Guide: Advancing Racial Equity in Your City, [click here](#).

Racial Equity Discussions in the GRCorps

AmeriCorps Provides Racial Justice Training

Several GRCorps members attended a training titled “Promoting Racial Justice and Supporting Efforts to End Racial Inequity.” Serve Wisconsin hosted the Zoom webinar on June 26, which featured speaker Dr. Alex Gee. Dr. Gee founded The Nehemiah Center for Urban Leadership Development in Madison, Wisconsin, and hosts the “Black Like Me” podcast series.

Dr. Gee started off his training by asking everyone to put a word in the chat that described how they were feeling about the state of the world, but he said black people didn’t have to answer. Words rolled in from the 500 people on the webinar, including sad, overwhelmed, listening and hopeful. Dr. Gee explained that he didn’t require black people to answer because often, people ask him how he’s feeling during this time, but they don’t ask white people the same question. He suggested that we ask white people how they’re feeling, especially those in positions of power who can hire more black people.

“Having a diversity plan, but not having a diverse staff doesn’t make sense,” Dr. Gee said. To end systemic racism, it will require not just people of color, but also white people to work on the challenges and speak up. **“Every institution must pivot because the world is changing,”** Dr. Gee said.

Dr. Gee further explained why he didn’t require black people to answer his chat question. He discussed how sometimes well-meaning white people will walk up to him or call him to talk about racial

issues, but it can be re-traumatizing to hear about this all of the time. The stress that people of color experience by navigating white spaces and dealing with microaggressions is detrimental to their health. Now that the world has seen the disparity in the experiences of black and white folks in this country, Dr. Gee said we can’t go back to the way things were. We need to implement changes and continue talking about racial issues because not talking about the problem will maintain the status quo.



CONTINUED LEARNING:

For those who want to continue thinking about the topic of racial equity, Dr. Gee recommended going to his website, www.alexgee.com, to view the new documentary, “Justified Journey.” In the documentary, Dr. Gee travels to Mississippi to learn about his ancestry and to talk to the white descendants of slave owners with ties to his family.

Did you notice the symbols in the margins of the newsletter?

Each symbol represents a category in the Greenest Region Compact and is placed around actions that depict a GRCorps member working on that category.



Climate



Economic Development



Energy



Land



Leadership



Mobility



Municipal Operations



Sustainable Communities



Waste



Water



**Application will be open until August 7th, 2020.
Find the application [here](#).**



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