

Will Homeless Families Find a Place on the New President's Agenda?

by Alan Zibel

Much is uncertain about the new administration's approach to the surge in student and family homelessness — except the need. The time has come to formulate comprehensive federal policies and solutions that work.

Poverty and homelessness have not featured prominently—if at all—in the new Trump administration's stated policy priorities. With a growing population of low-income families who lack a place they can call home, homeless advocates and service providers around the country are, at best, uncertain about the future.

"It's completely uncharted territory," said Barbara Duffield, executive director of **SchoolHouse Connection** and former director of policy and programs at the **National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth**. "You really can't look to a past Republican administration because this is not going to be like any other Republican administration we've ever seen."

It remains to be seen how many major changes to policies on homelessness will be enacted. On the other hand, the new administration's lack of concrete policy prescriptions could potentially provide an opening for advocates to push for new ideas that were not given serious consideration in the past. What is crystal clear, however, is that service providers across the U.S. are looking to the new administration with a long wish list.

Making Family Homelessness a Visible Issue

During the administrations of both George W. Bush and Barack Obama, federal officials focused their energies and funding priorities on **helping homeless veterans and single adults**, based on the premise that

people who sleep on the streets have the most severe needs.

In reaction, advocates and service providers say children and families who live in short-stay motels or with relatives are no less deserving of attention than single homeless adults who scrape by on the street.



Due to poor living conditions, homeless children are particularly vulnerable because they are at risk for missing excessive amounts of school and may have more exposure to violence, sexual abuse, and illness. Additionally, the educational deficits exacerbated by the instability of **homelessness may plague them for years.**

Family homelessness advocates and service providers have long wanted the federal government to recognize and prioritize homeless families and implement a broad set of strategies to address their educational, domestic violence, child neglect, mental health, substance abuse, income, and unemployment needs.

“The constant focus on ending chronic [single-person] homelessness has consumed the national policy arena for a long time,” said **Mattie Lord**, chief program officer at **UMOM New Day Centers**, a homeless shelter and affordable housing provider in **Arizona**. “We have been waiting long enough for our turn. Family homelessness is a solvable problem and it’s time to give it some attention.”

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***—Mattie Lord,
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Rather than treating homelessness simply as a “housing” issue, many advocates say the government would be better served focusing on the systemic issues that cause family poverty and homelessness.

Service providers around the country say they are seeing a surge of families sleeping in cars,

motels, or on the couches of friends or relatives. They are turning away families from already-full shelters. Many have mental health troubles or lack the education and job skills to earn a decent income and establish a minimal financial cushion.

They are people like Eric, a 50-year-old father of three sons in Arizona who became homeless this year. He has steady work as a restaurant cook and takes care of his two teenagers and a 12-year-old.

After deciding to move to a new apartment, Eric was unable to sign a lease after a credit check revealed that a previous landlord was seeking to collect about \$1,600 in unpaid rent, which he held he does not owe. Instead, he slept with two of his sons on the street, in a train station and a bus station, before landing at a shelter. “We had no options,” he said.

Eric has been looking to find a new apartment but hasn’t had any luck. He is able to afford rent, but is encountering skepticism from landlords who are concerned he might not pay. Ultimately, he believes he will be able to find a place to live. “I’ll get out of it,” he said. What is unknown is the effect the stress and uncertainty will have on his children’s education’s and his family’s well-being.



Intertwined Problems in a World of Silos

Providers around the country emphasize that homeless families like Eric's have complex needs and interrelated problems. Chief among them are poor education, lack of steady and gainful employment, domestic violence, and child neglect.

In **Philadelphia**, the **People's Emergency Center** offers housing, job training, parenting and early childhood education, financial education and planning, life skills classes, and technology courses. About 90 percent of women served by the social service agency have experienced domestic violence, while two-thirds have no high school degree. Most are under the age of 25. Many have mental health problems.

Joe Willard, vice president for policy and advocacy at People's Emergency Center, said many women are ashamed about domestic violence and are reluctant to talk about it. "You learn that only after a couple of weeks of them being in emergency housing," he said.

"Most people don't initially tell you the whole truth."

Willard sees several ways that federal and local officials can improve how they treat families who are homeless and experiencing a multitude of problems including domestic violence and child neglect. The child welfare system, he said, should work with housing officials so that foster children would have a housing plan before they leave the foster care system, preventing them from becoming homeless after they exit foster care. Additionally, Congress should significantly increase the **\$65 million** in annual

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—Joe Willard,
People's Emergency Center

Making Progress on Homelessness: View from a Rural State

by Angus Chaney

Small states with diffuse populations encounter unique challenges in combatting homelessness: We operate under all the federal requirements of a large city without the benefit of economies of scale — and with significant transportation barriers.

Consider the difference in cost between providing 500 shelter beds in a single city with providing that same number of beds across 14 rural counties. Now consider the same process with regard to prevention, outreach, transitional housing, rapid rehousing, affordable housing, and supportive housing.

Despite these challenges, Vermont has witnessed reductions in homelessness for the past two years. In the 2016 Point-in-Time count, we saw a one-year 28% reduction in homelessness. Because our focus has been broader than just one population, that success was seen across populations and in all regions.

We know that ending homelessness requires that policy makers address three key components: rental subsidies, services, and access to housing. Addressing only one or two in a region has limited impact.

In Vermont, we've made state-funded investments to address all three pieces of the equation.

Vermont's statewide rental subsidy program provides 12-month subsidies for Vermonters who are homeless. Local

nonprofit and state agency partners share case management duties and tenants transition to federal Section 8 rental assistance after a year. A \$1 million annual appropriation from the Vermont Legislature provides affordable housing to approximately 125 families.

Our Family Supportive Housing program provides two years of intensive case management and service coordination for formerly homeless families renting affordable housing. Our local housing review teams meet at the county level to identify housing solutions for households identified as homeless, and match them with the appropriate housing, subsidy, and services.

In addition, Governor Peter Shumlin's executive order from April 2016 increases access to housing by setting a goal that owners of publicly-funded housing make 15 percent of their portfolio available to people who were homeless.

On the federal side, the Department of Housing and Urban Development has been more responsive under the Obama administration. We're pleased that federal policy seems a bit more sophisticated about matching interventions such as transitional housing with people for whom it's most effective.

The federal government could make the same amount of taxpayer money go farther

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education funding for homeless children and youth, to provide additional support for homeless students so they can finish school.

"I would love to see them have a huge emphasis on high school graduation for homeless teenagers," Willard said. "It would be a great prevention program in slowing down the number of families who come into shelter."

On the issue of domestic violence, Willard said the Department of Housing and Urban Development should allow more grant funding to go to domestic violence shelters. He also suggested that local officials provide more training on how to serve trauma survivors who enter housing programs.

"It's going to require more than a house; it's going to require services and support."

***—Joe Lagana,
Homeless Children's Education Fund***

Many people who become homeless due to a life crisis can recover fairly easily through support and temporary shelter, said **Joe Lagana**, founder of the **Pittsburgh-based Homeless Children's Education Fund**. But homeless families in which a parent is struggling with drugs, prostitution, child neglect, and other issues need much more support.

"It's going to require more than a house; it's going to require services and support," Lagana said. That is especially important because research shows that homelessness experienced during pregnancy or in a child's early years has **long-term negative effects** on the child's health.

Christine Achre, chief executive officer of the **Primo Center for Women and Children in Chicago** said officials should invest in prevention strategies so families don't become homeless in the first place, and understand that funding needs to be individualized and flexible. Funding should be available for a variety of child care, mental health, employment, and education services.

"We have a lot of families that are coming in with serious and persistent mental illness, with child welfare involvement, with substance abuse," Achre said. "Families with complex challenges like these need extra support."

Making Progress on Homelessness, *cont.*

and have greater impact by streamlining some of the more burdensome regulations. HUD should consider multi-year grants and reduce the number of hours states must spend applying for relatively small annual grants.

I don't get mired in debates around Rapid Re-Housing versus Transitional Housing versus Permanent Supportive Housing because it's not an either/or proposition.

We've seen the most success in regions with the capacity to provide multiple options and a strong local team and process to coordinate and match a family's needs and goals to the right assistance.

In counties that lack the full continuum of options or emergency capacity, there's a greater risk a family or individual experiencing homelessness will receive the resource that is most available as opposed to most effective.

In Vermont and other rural states, families with children have come to represent a significant share of people experiencing homelessness.

Our understanding of the interrelation between homelessness and trauma has grown in recent years. The stress of homeles-

ness during a woman's pregnancy and in early childhood can have a huge impact on developmental, educational, behavioral and health outcomes. We are developing targeted policy and programs to address this important issue.

In 2015, Vermont set an ambitious statewide goal of ending homelessness among children and families by 2020.

Some may stand back to debate whether that's possible. Many others are already leaning in and helping with this collective push. In a single year, Vermont saw the number of homeless families with kids decline by 22 percent to 156 this year from 199 a year earlier.

Any country that can figure out how to put people on the moon or contemplate expeditions to new planets can find housing for its citizens. To be successful, every state will continue to need federal resources that are flexible enough to address the unique needs of local communities.

Angus Chaney is chair of Vermont Gov. Peter Shumlin's Interagency Council on Homelessness and Director of Housing at Vermont's Agency of Human Services

Family Homelessness as an Education Issue

Across the country, advocates work tirelessly to call attention to the lack of educational opportunities for the poorest of the poor. Quality education, starting at the preschool level, is crucial in determining whether children will fall into poverty and homelessness.

Nationwide, educators are finding that the number of homeless students is rising quickly. In the 2013–14 school year, the most recent for which data is available, a record-high **1.36 million homeless children attended public schools**, according to the **U.S. Department of Education**, up from under 800,000 in the 2007–08 school year.

“I don’t think anybody really understands the extent of the problem,” said **Susan Agel**, president of **Positive Tomorrows**, an **Oklahoma City** private school for children coping with homelessness. Families “don’t want to be visible on the street ... they’ll do just about anything they can just to hide away.”

“If you’re going to really stem homelessness, you need to start early, and the earlier start the better.”

**—Susan Agel,
Positive Tomorrows**

Focusing on children — particularly young children — is key, because they can be traumatized by a period of homelessness: **Almost half of children in shelters are under age six**, according to the **Department of Housing and Urban Development**.

“If you’re going to really stem homelessness, you need to start early, and the earlier start the better,” Agel said. “There’s not much talk about dealing with children’s programs. ... I would like to see some programs that recognize the special needs for children living in deep poverty and homelessness and provide funding for agencies that meet those needs.”

In addition to the more than 1.3 million homeless public school students, an estimated 600,000+ homeless children under five years of age will soon be entering school. Homeless students are more likely than their peers to be held back a grade, have poor attendance, fail a course or have disciplinary problems. A state-by-state analysis reveals that homeless families are far from an urban issue. In Florida, for instance, 78% of homeless students live in the suburbs. In Georgia, 39% live in towns and rural areas.

More than 40 percent of homeless students have dropped out of school at least once, according to **Hidden in Plain Sight**, a report on student homelessness published by **Civic Enterprises** in June 2016. Many never get any services: Among those surveyed, more than 60 percent say they had not been connected with any outside organization for support.

According to the report, only five states report high school graduation rates for homeless students, but those rates lag far behind those of all other students. In Washington state, for example, the overall four-year graduation rate is 77 percent, compared with 66 percent for economically disadvantaged students, and 46 percent for homeless students.

Family Homelessness as a Family Well-Being Issue

Every year, 22,000 children are removed from their families, at least partly because of inadequate housing or homelessness, **according to federal officials**. **Ruth Anne White**, executive director of the **National Center for Housing and Child Welfare**, said child welfare workers who encounter homeless children



are put in an impossible position, forced to decide whether to separate children from their parents and place them in foster care, or allow them to stay in an unsafe location—such as inside a car in freezing weather.

“If you have not abused or intentionally neglected your child, child welfare shouldn’t even be looking at you,” White said. “A family should never be investigated for that kind of thing.”

Homeless children also tend to stay longer in foster care, White said. “They’re stuck there because the judge, in good conscience, cannot award a kid back to a mom who’s living in a car. Eventually the parent’s rights are terminated.”

In **Oklahoma City**, **Dan Straughan**, executive director of the **Homelessness Alliance**, said the key problems leading to family homelessness are mental **health issues and substance abuse**. It’s rare to

encounter someone who is homeless solely because his or her income dried up, he said.

A person with mental health problems is often unable to access quality medical care and get treatment for a problem such as bipolar disorder. As a result, they may self-medicate, turning to drugs and alcohol. That substance abuse, in turn, can lead to job loss, child neglect, domestic violence, and homelessness.

Straughan said the federal government should stem

the root causes of family homelessness by providing increased funding for mental health and substance abuse programs. “The folks that have serious mental health issues and serious substance abuse issues are much harder to house and much harder to keep housed.”

Many providers would like HUD to grant local communities more flexibility in providing funding for programs that match local needs. Many consider HUD’s funding restrictions to be too strict and are calling for more flexibility for how they can use government funding.

“I do have days where I have to pick up the phone and say ‘I’m sorry, you’re not homeless enough for our program,’” said **Beth Benner**, executive director of the **Women’s Housing Coalition in Baltimore**.

Benner said federal regulations now require her to accept people with substance abuse problems as well as people who are sober. That is well-intentioned, she said, but it can pose a practical problem if someone who is clean and sober becomes upset that she’s sharing a bathroom with someone still struggling with drugs or alcohol. To deal with such problems, Benner said she will need to expand staffing, noting that “the government has given me no additional money” to do so.

“In Oklahoma City, the key problems leading to family homelessness are mental health issues and substance abuse. It’s rare to encounter someone who is homeless solely because his or her income dried up.”

— Dan Straughan, Homelessness Alliance

Family Homelessness as an Economic Issue

One key underlying reason for growing concern about family homelessness is the ongoing national conversation about income polarization—the “haves” and “have-nots.” While unemployment is back below 5 percent, incomes for low-income workers have remained stagnant over the past decade and have only recently

started to improve.

Meanwhile, the cost of rent has skyrocketed in recent years: A record high 11.4 million U.S. households pay more than half of their income toward housing, according to the **Harvard Joint Center for Housing Studies**.



Federal assistance reaches only a quarter of those who qualify. Nearly 14 million households are left to fend for themselves in the private rental market.

“In Atlanta, parents trying to escape homelessness often find themselves working temporary jobs in warehouses, bakeries, and other jobs that only pay the minimum wage of \$7.25 an hour.”

***— Jimiyu Evans,
Project Community Connections, Inc.***

Many low-income workers juggle multiple jobs with variable work hours that make it difficult to plan ahead. They are often scheduled for fewer hours than they would like, causing volatility in their income and stress at home.

In **Atlanta**, parents trying to escape homelessness often find themselves working temporary jobs in warehouses, bakeries, and other jobs that only pay the minimum wage of \$7.25 an hour, said **Jimiyu Evans**, director of operations at **Project Community Connections, Inc.**, which helps homeless people find housing.

At such low wages, it is very difficult to save up for first-month's rent and a security deposit in a city where rent is increasingly unaffordable. “Those wages and hours do not amount to enough for them to even qualify for an apartment,” Evans said.

Many homeless people lack the skills needed to survive in today's workplace, Evans said. To tackle that problem, his organization provides an enrichment program to help people with employment and workplace skills, such as getting along with co-workers and creating a resume. “They don't have the soft skills.”

What's To Be Done?

Voices from around the country are echoing that a strategy limited only to re-housing has not and will not yield results sufficient to address the needs of homeless families. Service providers feel a pent-up frustration. They want to see attention and resources dedicated to homeless families as well as a comprehensive, effective solution.

Barbara Duffield, executive director of **SchoolHouse Connection** and former Director of Policy and Programs for the National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth, said,

“... without early care and education, the prospect of affording any kind of housing as an adult is slim, making today's homeless children more likely to become tomorrow's homeless adults.”

***— Barbara Duffield,
SchoolHouse Connection***

“What should drive the vision of the next administration? We propose a realistic, two-generational approach to family and youth homelessness, grounded in the interconnected and equally vital roles of housing, education, early care, and services. Indeed, without early care and education, the prospect of affording any kind of housing as an adult is slim, making today's homeless children more likely to become tomorrow's homeless adults.”

Eva Thibaudeau, director of programs at **Coalition for the Homeless, Houston TX**, advocates for flexibility in how federal

funds are used to address homelessness: “We often get into our camps as if there is one option that would work for everyone. We know that is not true. With every population we are trying to build up choices.”



The “Great Unknown” is the new administration’s priorities on poverty and homelessness. Some suggested action items for the new administration include:

Look Family Homelessness in the Eye

- Recognize that family homelessness is growing at epidemic rates.
- Recognize that it is a local issue, and every locality is different.
- Expand the federal definition of homelessness to include families living “doubled up,” i.e., in motels or temporarily with other people.
- Recognize that flexibility is key to crafting an effective local response.

“It is simply unacceptable for individuals, children, families, and our nation’s veterans to be faced with homelessness in this country.” [June 18, 2009]

“And preventing and ending homelessness is not just a Federal issue or responsibility. It will also require the skill and talents of people outside of Washington—where the best ideas are most often found. ... As we undertake this effort, investing in the status quo is no longer acceptable.” [Opening Doors: Federal Strategic Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness, 2010]

—President Barack Obama

Meet the Educational Needs of Homeless Children

- Prioritize and increase outreach to expand high-quality early learning opportunities.
- Increase federal funding for the Education for Homeless Children and Youth program and reauthorize the Elementary and Secondary Education Act.
- Pass legislation to reduce barriers to receiving financial aid for homeless students attending college.

“Expand access to early childhood programs for children experiencing homelessness, to ensure that the trauma and toxic stress that accompanies homelessness does not disrupt brain development and compromise the foundation for future learning and health. We should also expand supports to pre-K–12 education for students experiencing homelessness, including enforcing compliance with the McKinney-Vento Act and Title I Part A provisions on homelessness and increasing funding for those programs. Without a high school degree, there is little hope of obtaining a job that pays enough to afford housing.”

—Barbara Duffield, SchoolHouse Connection

Adopt Policies that Support Homeless Families

- Invest in local low-income housing initiatives.
- Increase federal funding for child care assistance and prioritize access for homeless families.
- Increase federal funding for domestic violence shelters.
- Encourage state-level programs to reduce families’ risk of food insecurity, similar to **SNAP** and **WIC**.

“There has been a significant federal push to prioritize existing resources to end chronic homelessness over the past decade. This has impeded the ability for communities, particularly those disproportionately dependent on federal funding, to develop comprehensive planning to impact all four goals [to end homelessness.]”

—Mattie Lord, UMOM New Day Center

Target Assistance to Homeless Families

- Dedicate significant federal funds to easing family homelessness, consistent with efforts to assist chronically homeless adults and veterans.
- Align HUD’s definition of homelessness with that used by other federal agencies, i.e., to include families living doubled up.
- Collect and publicly release necessary data through HUD.

“We need to create better incentives for non-profit and for-profit developers—something both parties can agree upon.”

—Margaret Schuelke, Project Community Connections, Inc.

Views from Around America

A Wish List for Federal Policymakers

by Alan Zibel

What concrete steps can the new administration in Washington take to stem the growth of family homelessness?

**Mattie Lord, Chief Program Officer,
UMOM New Day Centers, Phoenix**

“The national rhetoric is that housing ends homelessness. That is true, but it is oversimplifying the issue and the needs. Why not make additional investments now that will reshape our long-term future? The return on investment in young children is significant. Children experiencing homelessness tend to have a multitude of risk factors and complexities that are not resolved with housing alone. As a nation, we need to view all children as our collective future and invest in them. They need and are deserving of services to help them achieve developmental milestones, reduce emotional problems and toxic stress, access quality education, avoid family separation due to child welfare removals, reduce family violence and increase capacity for healthy pregnancies and parenting.”

**John Jeanetta, President and CEO,
Heartland Family Service, Omaha**

“Our wish list would include funding decisions that are data driven. To become data driven, funders should ask how successful are specific programs, continuums, states, etc. at ending homelessness? How many families return to homelessness? Are these entities cost effective in their approach? Are they using best practices? Accountability will also be key. How are health and human service departments, as well as school districts, accountable to ensure that resources—funds and/or people—are dedicated to helping homeless service and domestic violence providers solve homelessness.”

**Katie Hill, Deputy CEO and Executive Director,
PATH, Los Angeles**

“We recognize that Opening Doors was developed and implemented during a Democratic administration, but it is our sincere hope that the new administration can recognize the objective progress that has been made because of this plan—33 percent reduction in veteran homelessness, major reductions in chronic homelessness in communities across the country, broad implementation of evidence

based practices, the public and private sectors working together more effectively than ever before. We hope that this progress can be built on with the new administration, which has repeatedly proclaimed its commitment to working class families. We truly hope that this commitment will extend to the most vulnerable of those families—the ones who have lost everything, including a place to call home. We know what it takes to address family homelessness. We just need the resources and the ongoing commitment from our government partners to make it happen.”

**Joyce McMillan, Director of Programming/Parent Advocate, Child Welfare Organizing Project,
New York**

“It is my wish that the new administration knows that poverty is not neglect and that no one wants to be poor. When people in power have a lack of understanding they add layers of surveillance to people who live in poverty. Surveillance is not support. It is counterproductive to have agencies that should embody support, help, and assistance provide only more stress. People who live in shelters in New York City live in deplorable situations with additional governmental oversight and a bunch of Catch-22 rules that prevent them from climbing out of their current situation of despair. It is my hope that the new administration will incorporate the voices of those who have been negatively affected by the ‘Good Intention’ policies put in place by people of privilege and power that don’t understand lack in any form, especially a lack of hope.”

**Susan Agel, President, Positive Tomorrows,
Oklahoma City**

“I would like to see additional programs put in place to help with the need for affordable housing, such as subsidies so that developers would have some impetus to add low-income units to their apartment complexes. I would also like to see some programs that recognize the special needs for children living in deep poverty and homelessness and provide funding for agencies like mine that meet those needs. Currently, fed-

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Views from Around America, *cont.*

eral education dollars focus on mainstreaming homeless children and the supports aren't there to help them succeed in a typical classroom. Improved mental health programs are also a big need, especially in Oklahoma. Adequate treatment is unavailable for people in poverty, which causes them to sink even further into poverty, homelessness, and child neglect."

Joyce Lavery, CEO and Executive Director, Safe Haven Family Shelter, Nashville

"Child welfare, education, and domestic violence are not separate issues. They all impact each other and stable housing is needed the most. More funding for one without looking at root causes such as poverty and broken social service systems will not have the impact needed to reverse the trend of family homelessness. The Family Options study indicates that providing permanent housing subsidies improves other measures of well-being."

Christine Achre, Chief Executive Officer, Primo Center for Women and Children, Chicago

"We should invest in prevention dollars so families stay housed and do not become homeless in the first place. It is not "one size fits all" to address these issues. Funding needs to be individualized and flexible, catered to the needs of the family. We must ensure funding for a number

of services including home visiting, child care, trauma-informed mental health, employment, and education. Do not assume that all mainstream systems can provide everything a family needs. We must understand the importance of early learning, home visiting, and parental supports. These investments are critical to the long term success in a child's development."

Margaret Schuelke, Executive Director, Project Community Connections, Inc., Atlanta

"We can't say it better than President Obama, 'Of course, nothing helps families make ends meet like higher wages ... and to everyone in this Congress who still refuses to raise the minimum wage, I say this: If you truly believe you could work full-time and support a family on less than \$15,000 a year, go try it. If not, vote to give millions of the hardest-working people in America a raise.'"

Barbara Duffield, SchoolHouse Connection

"A long-term strategy for preventing families from becoming homeless again must include early care and education. It should expand access to early childhood programs for children experiencing homelessness to ensure that the trauma and toxic stress that accompanies homelessness does not disrupt brain development and compromise the foundation for future learning and health. We should also expand supports to pre-K-12 education for students experiencing homelessness, including enforcing compliance with the McKinney-Vento Act and Title I Part A provisions on homelessness and increasing funding for those programs. Without a high school degree, there is little hope of obtaining a job that pays enough to afford housing. We also need to streamline financial aid and build supports for college access, retention, and success. Increasingly, a college degree is necessary for the jobs created in our economy. In addition, a college degree is associated with better life outcomes more generally, including social, emotional, and physical health." ■



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