Examples from Four States Using New Technologies to Improve Recruitment and Retention of Qualified Special Education Personnel

by Eve Müller, Ph.D.

States and local education agencies (LEAs) throughout the nation are experiencing critical shortages in qualified special education personnel (AAEE, 2010) and according to projections by the Bureau of Labor Statistics 2010-2011, this problem will only get worse. In efforts to remedy the situation, states are developing innovative approaches to recruiting and retaining special education teachers and related service providers, including the use of the following nine new technologies:

- recruitment websites;
- outreach efforts using new social media;
- virtual job fairs;
- web-based professional development;
- e-mentoring;
- virtual communities of practice;
- online working conditions surveys;
- telepractice; and
- bug-in-ear coaching.

This document tells the stories of the development and implementation of these technologies at the state or regional level in four states. We have featured at least two of these technologies for each state.

Definitions

Recruitment websites are websites dedicated to the recruitment of personnel to the field of education and/or to specific jobs. Although most online recruitment sites are not special education-specific, many are sponsored by and/or funded through states’ offices of special education.

New social media such as blogs, Facebook, Twitter and YouTube are used to attract potential new hires as well as to enable more immediate communication with existing general and special education personnel.¹

Virtual job fairs provide a computer-based means for recruiters to connect with potential job candidates via video, voice and text. Virtual job fairs designed to fill general and special education positions allow candidates to listen to presentations, visit employers’ “booths,” leave resumes and complete applications, and participate in live chats with recruiters from LEAs and other education organizations.

Web-based professional development opportunities enable special education personnel...
Examples from Four States Using New Technologies to Improve

to participate in trainings without having to travel long distances. Often, these modules can be accessed at any time. Web-based modules vary in terms of length, whether they provide continuing education units (CEUs) and whether they are independent or include a live facilitator.

**eMentoring** offers a means of providing mentoring using online software and/or email. States and LEAs are increasingly using eMentoring as a means of providing mentoring supports to novice special education teachers.

**Virtual communities of practice** (CoPs) are online groups of people who share a common goal of increasing professional knowledge via the exchange of information and experiences with other members of the group. Online communities of practice are increasingly common in the field of special education and have been identified as a means of increasing retention.

**Online working conditions surveys** enable states to gather data on employee satisfaction and support needs and provide building-level feedback that can be used to improve working conditions and ultimately retention rates. Special education-specific surveys can help identify needs and challenges unique to this group.

**Telepractice** is increasingly being used by speech language therapists (SLTs) and other clinicians to deliver professional services at a distance using interactive video conferencing technologies.

**Bug-in-ear coaching** allows supervisors to give new teachers and therapists immediate feedback on how they are providing instruction in the classroom using technology such as Bluetooth earpieces and/or interactive video conferencing.

**Data Collection**

Based on recent studies conducted by the National Center to Improve Recruitment and Retention of Qualified Personnel for Children with Disabilities (PIC) at the National Association of State Directors of Special Education (NASDSE) (Müller, 2010; Müller, 2011), as well as an informal 2012 NASDSE survey of states’ uses of new technologies, four states were selected to participate in in-depth interviews about their use of new technologies to recruit and retain qualified special education personnel: Arizona, Florida, Idaho and Kansas. In February and March of 2012, the PIC conducted interviews with key staff in each of the states. Although most states reported using multiple new technologies for recruitment/retention purposes, interviewees were only asked to describe in detail a select few of these. States’ use of new technologies is reported in the following section.

**Four State Stories**

**Arizona**

**Recruitment Websites**

Arizona’s online recruitment site, the Arizona Education Employment Board (AEEB)³, was launched in 1999 to help LEAs find qualified candidates for hard-to-fill positions. Although the website is not special education-specific, many hard-to-fill positions in Arizona are special education positions – including occupational therapists (OTs), physical therapists (PTs) and SLTs, school psychologists and local special education directors.

The purpose of AEEB is to meet the needs of both employers and job seekers. For example, use of AEEB is free to all Arizona LEAs and charter schools and to all job seekers, both in-state and out-of-state. LEAs and charter schools can post unfilled education positions, search for applicants by position and sign up to use the online job application that will allow them to save and print any applications submitted. AEEB staff worked closely with school district human resource directors to develop the online application form. Job seekers can search for jobs by region, educational setting and position (including related service providers, paraprofessionals and administrators); register to
enable LEA administrators to contact them directly; and register to have job postings sent directly to their email accounts. AEEB also provides links to certification requirements, all Arizona LEAs and charters, the Great Arizona Teach-in website, Facebook, Twitter and YouTube.

AEEB is a collaborative effort of the Arizona Department of Education’s offices of Exceptional Student Services, Highly Effective Teachers and Leaders, and Certification. The Department of Education develops AEEB’s website content and advertises and promotes use of AEEB. Technical Assistance for Excellence in Special Education (TAESE) maintains the website database and monitors website use. The Department of Education and TAESE have worked together to “brand” the website with a Western-style ‘wanted poster’ theme.

The yearly cost of operating AEEB is approximately $60,000. AEEB is funded through IDEA Part B and staffed through TAESE (IT specialist and database specialist) and the Arizona Department of Education (recruitment and retention specialist, Exceptional Student Services).

Arizona also sponsors Teach in AZ, a website launched in 2006 to help LEAs find and retain qualified education personnel, including special education personnel. For the first part of the year, the site helps recruit new teachers to the field, as well as providing resources for novice and veteran teachers. The site also provides information for teachers looking to relocate to Arizona. In February, the Teach in AZ website changes to the Great Arizona Teach-In website in order to promote the state’s annual job fair.

Key components of the Teach in AZ website include sections on how to become a teacher, certification requirements, how to find a job (including links to AEEB), careers in special education, information on specific LEAs, resources for teachers and LEAs, and recruitment and retention strategies (e.g., information on how LEAs can improve working conditions, set up mentoring teams and conduct needs assessments). During the second part of the year, the site is primarily used to register exhibitors for the AZ Teach-In Job Fair and provide information to help candidates and exhibitors (LEAs and charters) successfully participate in the job fair.

The yearly cost of operating and maintaining Teach in AZ is approximately $60,000 and is paid for with IDEA Part B funds. As with AEEB, TAESE maintains the website database and the Arizona Department of Education develops content and advertises and promotes the use of the website.

New Social Media

In 2007, the Arizona Department of Education first started using the blogging site, Jobing.com, to attract qualified special education personnel. Since then, the Department has added Facebook, YouTube and Twitter to its arsenal of recruitment strategies and has expanded the use of these new social media to include all potential education personnel. The impetus for using new social media was the desire to connect with a new generation of technology-savvy candidates. Facebook, Twitter and YouTube are primarily used to promote the Great Arizona Teach-in.

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The annual cost of the Department’s use of new social media is negligible. Staff from Exceptional Student Services is responsible for generating regular blog entries. TAESE provides weekly Facebook posts and Twitter feeds as part of its memorandum of agreement with the Arizona Department of Education.
Florida

**Online Working Conditions Surveys**

Florida regularly gathers information on working conditions for related service providers via online surveys called *Working with the Experts Needs Assessments*. These biannual surveys are an extension of *Working with the Experts*, a program that has provided professional development for Florida’s related services providers for more than 40 years. In order to better meet the needs of related service providers, *Working with the Experts* conducts needs assessments and in the past five years these assessments have evolved into a biannual online survey.

*Working with the Experts* was originally designed to serve SLTs, but over time the program has expanded to serve OTs and PTs as well. Consequently, Florida now conducts two separate online surveys, one for SLTs and one for OTs and PTs. Respondents to these statewide surveys include related service providers, assistants and supervisors. The purpose of the surveys is to facilitate planning of targeted professional development.

Survey questions are developed by an advisory committee and focus not only on professional development needs, but also on identification of the most critical issues in the field. This broadening of focus was driven by the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association, which encourages states to measure workload as opposed to caseload. Surveys gather demographic information (e.g., role, LEA, number of years in the field and ages of students), detailed information about professional development needs (e.g., content area, location of trainings and format) and information relating to ongoing professional challenges as well as successful LEA practices. Surveys are promoted via professional newsletters and listservs, as well as sent out via emails to LEA administrators with a request that invitations be forwarded to any staff associated with the provision of related services. Invitations contain an embedded link to the survey.

The program was originally developed and maintained by the Florida Department of Education, but while the Department still approves the *Working with the Experts* curriculum and calendar of events, the program is now managed by Department of Education-sponsored discretionary projects housed at local institutions of higher education (IHEs). The two discretionary projects (one for SLTs and one for OT/PTs) have their own advisory committees consisting of SEA staff, LEA representatives, discretionary project staff and the state’s CEU providers.

The cost of conducting the surveys is negligible. The survey tools are free or inexpensive (e.g., the SLT survey is conducted using Survey Monkey and the OT/PT survey uses a program available through the IHE) and research assistants from local IHEs summarize the data. Funding for the surveys is paid for with Florida’s State Personnel Development Grant (SPDG) and Part B discretionary dollars.

The survey results have improved the way professional development is delivered throughout the state, selecting topics and presenters, developing an online resource guide and providing feedback to the Florida Department of Education regarding concerns and needs for policy guidance.

**Bug-in-Ear Coaching**

The *University of West Florida’s Virtual Coaching Model (UWF/VCM)* was first piloted in the Fall of 2011. UWF offers a growing online personnel preparation program for general and special educators and developed the UWF/VCM in response to the need to provide more intensive supervision and support to its student teachers – many of them, including military personnel, residing a significant distance from the UWF campus. A virtual coaching model was particularly attractive to UWF because it saved both money and time, while at the same time enabling coaches to provide student teachers with immediate and more frequent feedback. Although UWF/VCM currently
targets all student teachers who happen to require additional supervision and feedback (based on their student teaching evaluations), program participants include special education teachers.

The primary goal of UWF/VCM is to increase the amount of immediate feedback that student teachers receive in the classroom during instructional delivery. Participating student teachers attend an orientation where they receive a technology backpack that includes an iPod Touch, Bluetooth earpiece and a case/stand for the iPod. The iPod comes preloaded with FaceTime (Apple software that enables videoconferencing). Students are encouraged to visit a video coaching website that includes set-up instructions and checklists, as well as a YouTube video on how to sync the Bluetooth with the iPod. Student teachers set up their iPods so that supervisors can “view” their classrooms during videoconferencing sessions and supervisors provide immediate feedback to student teachers via the Bluetooth earpiece.

UWF is currently conducting two pilot studies using video coaching technology with a combined total of 12 participating student teachers, including several students from UWF’s Exceptional Student Education program. Each study participant receives an additional 30 observations with feedback per semester as opposed to controls who receive a minimum of only seven observations per semester. By Fall, 2013, UWF plans to offer virtual coaching to all student teachers participating in its online elementary education program, including the approximately 34 students in its Exceptional Student Education program. This will involve hiring and training a team of 8-10 fulltime virtual coaches. Students entering the program will also be required to have the necessary technology supports to enable Internet video conferencing.

The cost of the technology backpack is approximately $260. Although salary for coaches is included in the overall cost of the project, UWF estimates that the actual per-student cost will decrease as the university transitions from face-to-face to virtual coaching, even as the actual number of coaching hours increases. Both pilot projects are funded through a combination of UWF grants and gifts.

Idaho

Web-based Professional Development

The Idaho Training Clearinghouse (ITC) is designed to provide a single online access point or “one stop shop” for special education training opportunities and resources available throughout the state. ITC offers an extensive array of web-based professional development in the form of both webinar series and online professional development credit offerings. The site was first developed in 2005 as part of Idaho’s State Improvement Grant. The goal of the ITC was to improve outreach to special education professionals regarding available training opportunities. Initially, the ITC posted an online calendar of upcoming trainings, provided online registration and archived training resources. Over time, however, ITC has increasingly moved towards offering web-based professional development (although it still promotes some traditional, face-to-face trainings). ITC also ensures that trainings are accessible to those living in remote regions of the state and are consistent in terms of both content and quality.

ITC is increasingly packaging webinars in “series” in order to provide a more comprehensive training experience. Current series address topics such as assistive technology, getting started as a new special education teacher, specific learning disabilities and serving students with low-incidence disabilities. Some webinars allow participants to receive certificates of completion. More than a dozen professional
development credit offerings, which allow participants to earn undergraduate- and graduate-level university credits, address autism spectrum disorders, cognitive impairment and secondary transition. A future goal of ITC is to offer special certificates in specific content areas. Credit offerings are facilitated by an online instructor and participants can interact with other members of their semester-based “cohort.”

In developing webinars and professional development credit offerings, ITC seeks to ensure accessibility across a wide range of technology platforms (e.g., personal computers, Mac computers, iPads and tablets). Past webinars are archived on the site and users will soon be able to search categorically (e.g., by date, topic or presenter). In order to track user demographics, a pop-up window requires users to provide information about who they are.

The cost of operating the ITC is approximately $300,000 per year. The Idaho State Department of Education provides funding for ITC, as well as content expertise. ITC provides technology infrastructure and support.

**Virtual Communities of Practice**

ITC currently hosts 14 virtual CoPs or online Learning Communities. These were developed several years ago in response to the geographical isolation faced by many Idaho special education personnel. By participating in virtual rather than face-to-face learning communities, special educators were able to save significant travel time. The Idaho State Department of Education also supported the idea of CoPs because this model allows participants to access resources beyond educators’ local or even regional setting and to engage in statewide discussions of critical professional issues.

Examples of topics covered by Idaho’s Learning Communities include alternate assessment, accessible instructional materials, assistive technology, charter schools, continuous improvement monitoring systems, early childhood, IDEA dispute resolution, parent/school success, secondary transition and specific learning disabilities. Most of these communities are open to the public. The state also offers membership-only groups for secondary special education teachers requiring support to implement a response to intervention (RTI) model, RTI coaches and trainers, special education directors and new special education teachers.

The CoP on secondary special education teachers and RTI provides information on available tools and how to troubleshoot problems. The CoP also provides a vehicle for the Department of Education to disseminate information and identify needs for additional policy guidance, inviting responses from the Regional Resource Center and/or the National Center on RTI as needed. Several conversation threads are usually active at one time.

The CoP for new special teachers is more structured. It provides a year-long introduction to the profession and sometimes includes related service providers as well as new special education teachers. CoP facilitators

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Shawn Wright
Idaho Training Clearinghouse

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Julie Wilson
South East Kansas Education Service Center-Greenbush

The CoP on secondary special education teachers provides a year-long introduction to the profession and sometimes includes related service providers as well as new special education teachers. CoP facilitators provide information on available tools and how to troubleshoot problems. The CoP also provides a vehicle for the Department of Education to disseminate information and identify needs for additional policy guidance, inviting responses from the Regional Resource Center and/or the National Center on RTI as needed. Several conversation threads are usually active at one time.

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introduce different topics based on a new teacher “toolkit” that parallels the academic calendar. Also, in addition to virtual interactions, the new teacher CoP requires three days of face-to-face training. Other CoPs are facilitated by Department of Education representatives, IHE faculty or invited guests. The contents of all of Idaho’s online Learning Communities are recorded and archived on the ITC website.

The Idaho State Department of Education funds the Learning Communities and the Department and its discretionary projects housed at IHEs throughout the state provide content expertise and facilitation. The Idaho Training Clearinghouse provides technology infrastructure and support. The cost of creating and maintaining the Learning Communities is included in the overall $300,000 budget mentioned above and creating virtual communities of learners is ultimately less expensive than requiring regular, face-to-face trainings and meetings.

The CoP for new special education teachers, intended to improve retention rates and alleviate some of the pressure on LEAs to provide adequate support for new staff, includes participants from all 132 LEAs. In 2011-12, a total of approximately 250 new teachers participated. Total participants across all CoPs exceeded 1,000.

**Telepractice**

The Idaho State Department of Education is currently sponsoring a small-scale telepractice pilot project in central Idaho. The purpose of the pilot is to provide speech language therapy services to several geographically remote LEAs having difficulty hiring and retaining qualified personnel. The initial impetus was to reduce costs by pooling the financial resources of several LEAs. The decision to consider a telepractice model came about when administrators realized that students would have more frequent access to services than if they opted for a traditional, face-to-face therapy model.

As part of the pilot, one or two SLTs will provide services to several students. Telepractice will be supplemented with face-to-face therapy if needed.

The pilot represents a collaboration among the Idaho State Department of Education, participating LEAs and the health care center with which the LEA is contracting for speech language therapy services. The Department of Education has authorized the pilot and will provide ongoing guidance to LEAs regarding expectations and outcomes. The LEAs are implementing and monitoring student progress toward meeting IEP goals. The contracting health care center is accountable to the LEA for providing required speech language therapy services.

**Kansas**

**Web-based Professional Development**

In 2010, the Kansas Department of Education identified elearning as a priority for the state’s Technical Assistance System Network (TASN). Although funds were originally awarded to two projects, the Kansas Educational Employment Board (KEEB) is now solely responsible for web-based professional development offerings. KEEB provides centralized access to online professional development resources for special education teachers.

KEEB partners with the New Teacher Center to provide ementoring and online professional development. The New Teacher Center refers to its online professional development offerings as “Explorations.” Each
Exploration provides eight weeks of guided, interactive instruction on a specific topic with the goal of supporting new special education teachers to improve their teaching practices. Explorations are facilitated by online mentors (all professionally certified in Kansas) and the participants are a small cohort of new teachers or “mentees.” Explorations are structured so that teachers can experiment with new instructional strategies by following a sequential model of plan/prepare, teach/assess and reflect/analyze. Teachers develop and post their personal action plans online as well as their reflections regarding implementation and overall effectiveness. Mentors and other cohort members then provide feedback. New Explorations are offered during the Fall, Winter and Spring semesters and include topics such as transition planning, working with paraprofessionals, using assistive technology, and science and math instruction. KEEB staff plans to work with the New Teacher Center to develop a Kansas-specific curriculum (e.g., an Inquiry addressing Multi-Tiered Systems of Support [MTSS], Kansas’ version of RTI).

Although Explorations are available to any first-through third-year special education teachers on a first-come, first-served basis, KEEB especially targets new teachers in LEAs with high rates of attrition and LEAs that approached other projects for support in 2010.

KEEB contracts with the New Teacher Center to provide online professional development and ementoring, as well as promotional tools needed to recruit LEAs and new teachers. The Kansas Department of Education provides leadership and designates funds for KEEB. The staff of the Southeast Kansas Education Service Center-Greenbush is responsible for promoting KEEB’s online professional development offerings at the LEA level, and Kansas University evaluates program outcomes.

Explorations participants receive stipends to cover the cost of tuition. Each Exploration costs $150 per teacher and KEEB’s goal is to provide each of 200 new special education teachers with two Explorations. KEEB is currently funded through SPDG dollars. Because KEEB is so new, program outcomes are not yet available.

In addition to Explorations, KEEB provides online professional development and resources to special education administrators who are implementing mentoring programs and retention efforts at the LEA level.

**eMentoring**

In 2010, the Kansas Department of Education identified ementoring as a priority for the state’s Technical Assistance System Network (TASN). As with elearning, KEEB is responsible for providing ementoring to new special education teachers throughout the state. Superintendents and special education directors were initially asked what types of online retention efforts they most wanted and ementoring was high on the list. KEEB staff also met with staff from the Teacher Licensure unit, which had established a partnership with the New Teacher Center to offer face-to-face mentoring in four LEAs, and these discussions resulted in the decision to pursue online mentoring in order to reach more new teachers than possible via face-to-face mentoring alone. KEEB’s ementoring program, eMentoring for Student Success (eMSS),10 was launched in 2011. Twenty-two new special education teachers are currently enrolled in the program.

Components of Kansas’ eMSS include ementors professionally certified in Kansas; access to a facilitated online community of practice that includes veteran educators, IHE faculty, new teachers and preservice teachers; opportunities to ask questions and receive prompt online feedback; opportunities to interact with IHE faculty and/or experienced educators; and
opportunities to engage in Explorations (online professional development opportunities described in the preceding section of this document). Whenever possible, KEEB pairs new teachers with in-state mentors. Mentors are hired and receive stipends from the New Teacher Center. Participation in eMSS is voluntary and free of charge.

eMSS currently has 200 slots for ementoring and KEEB’s goal is to provide an additional 200 by the end of 2012. Ideally, eMSS will complement LEAs’ existing efforts to support new special education teachers. For example, if an LEA already offers face-to-face mentoring, mentors and mentees can nonetheless access online mentoring resources available through eMSS.

The cost of providing online mentoring through the New Teacher Center is $1,200 per mentee. Funding for eMSS is through KEEB (described in the preceding section). KEEB works closely with Teacher Licensure staff to ensure that eMSS meets Kansas’ requirements that teachers receive mentoring in order to be promoted from a provisional or initial to a professional license. The South East Kansas Education Service Center-Greenbush (of which KEEB is a part) promotes eMSS at the LEA level, recruits LEAs to the mentoring program and educates LEA staff about other KEEB retention resources.

Telepractice

In 2010, the South East Kansas Education Service Center-Greenbush piloted Greenbush Connects, a regional program using telepractice to deliver occupational and speech-language therapy to students living in remote parts of the state. Greenbush Connects was designed to address personnel shortages, as well as to reduce time and costs associated with travel.

Services provided by Greenbush Connects include screening and evaluation, consultation and individual or group therapies delivered via interactive videoconferencing. The program serves students with IEPs, as well as students receiving early intervening services. All therapists are professionally licensed in the state of Kansas.

Greenbush Connects provides necessary technology, including a high definition web camera, high quality audio microphone and a computer with monitor. Greenbush Connects also provides training and technical support to onsite school staff prior to starting services, as well as throughout the year as needed. The school provides space for the therapy sessions, a DSL Internet connection with sufficient bandwidth to accommodate videoconferencing and a paraprofessional or other aide to assist with establishing the connection for the therapy session and help implement any “hands on” therapeutic interventions. Services are provided online using a secure videoconferencing platform (e.g., GoToMeeting or Cisco WebEx) that meets both HIPPA and FERPA standards.

Individual LEAs contract with the South East Kansas Education Service Center-Greenbush to provide telepractice services via Greenbush Connects, which is a fee-for-service program. The cost of services is approximately $60 per hour. All contracts are signed by Greenbush Connects, individual schools and LEA superintendents to ensure that LEA-level tech staff provides needed support.

Greenbush Connects currently has eight licensed therapists (four SLTs and four OTs) on staff providing teletherapy to four LEAs in the southeastern and northeastern regions of the state. The program has had no difficulties recruiting qualified staff and has hired a number of licensed therapists residing in urban areas and desiring more flexible work schedules than a traditional school setting would provide. Over the course of two years, Greenbush Connects has provided speech-language therapy to 52 students with IEPs, occupational therapy to 25 students with IEPs and evaluations for 12 students receiving services as part of response to intervention systems.

“We got involved in teletherapy because our local programs were having difficulty finding therapists.”

Stacie Clarkson
Greenbush Connects
Concluding Remarks

In response to shortages, the four states profiled in this document are using new technologies in creative ways in order to improve recruitment and retention of qualified special education personnel. Although only limited data are available regarding the effectiveness of some of these practices, all of these technologies appear to be having a positive impact on states’ recruitment and retention efforts.

ENDNOTES

1 For more information on how to use new social media for recruitment purposes, see the Personnel Improvement Center’s (PIC’s) document on this topic at: http://personnelcenter.org/documents/Using%20New%20Social%20Media%20to%20Recruit%20and%20Retain%20Qualified%20Special%20Education%20Personnel-HEADINGS.pdf.

2 For more information on how COPs are being used in the field of special education, see Project Forum’s document on this topic (Project Forum is a former OSEP-funded project at NASDSE that ended in December, 2012): http://www.projectforum.org/docs/Communities%20of%20Practice%20Activities%20Sponsored%20by%20the%20Office%20of%20Special%20Education%20Programs.pdf.

3 To visit AEEB, go to http://www.arizonaeducationjobs.com/.

4 To visit Teach in AZ, go to http://www.teachinaz.com/.

5 For more information on Working with the Experts, go to http://www.flwwe.net/.

6 To visit the VCM coaching website, go to www.coachwandawade.com.

7 To visit ITC and learn more about its web-based professional development opportunities, go to http://itcnew.idahotc.com/.

8 For more information on KEEB, go to http://ksdetasn.org/cms/index.php/currenttaprojects/49-keeb.

9 For more information on the New Teacher Center, go to http://www.newteachercenter.org/.

10 For more information on EMSS, go to http://keepinkansas.com/.

11 For more information on Greenbush Connects, go to http://www.greenbush.org/index.php/programs/g/197greenbush-connects.html.
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