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INITIATIVE FOR COVID-19 RAPID RESPONSE SOLUTIONS (ICR2S)

Workers at the Table
**Recommendations for Best Practices for
the Hotel Industry as it Recovers from COVID-19**

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In collaboration with UNITE HERE! Local 5
and Hawai'i Workers Center

June 17, 2020



Ma luna a'e o nā lāhui a pau ke ola o ke kanaka
Above all nations is humanity

~ University of Hawai'i motto

*In a vibrant climate, the translation of knowledge into application is important because it
enhances the human condition, the greater good.*

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Abstract

The Issue: Hotel work and associated jobs constitute slightly less than a fifth of all jobs in Hawai'i. Under the COVID-19 pandemic conditions, reopening tourism depends upon hotel workers' input in the planning, design, execution, and evaluation of standards to ensure the health and safety of residents and tourists.

Current Investigation: Our findings are based on our analysis of planning documents from hotel workers and the tourism industry as well as our continuing discussions with leadership and workers in UNITE HERE! Local 5 and the Hawai'i Workers Center. We contextualize our findings in the long-standing demands of hotel workers in Hawai'i.

Recommendation: We recommend workers have a place at the table in all discussions about reopening tourism and an equal voice in shaping the future of Hawai'i's hotel industry. We propose the following behavioral and structural changes: a) health and safety measures related to cleaning and sanitation, social distancing, and testing, and b) structural changes to provide paid sick leave and health care for all, changes in hotel design and workload to meet COVID-19 safety guidelines, work share options, and worker-led safety trainings, evaluation and enforcement.



Introduction

The COVID-19 related public health measures have starkly underlined the risks of travel and tourism in spreading the virus. Hawai'i's reliance on tourism and the job losses in that sector have raised fundamental questions about what tourism and the local communities' safety will look like as COVID-19 continues to take its toll.¹

We recommend that state and business leaders collaborate with hotel workers as equally invested partners with an equal voice in shaping the future of Hawai'i's hotel industry including planning and design, execution, and evaluation. In short, we envision a strong partnership at every stage of the recovery process and beyond.

¹ Labor data published by the University of Hawaii Economic Research Organization estimated 113,000 jobs in accommodations and food service in the last quarter of 2019. The job losses in Hawai'i's hospitality as a result of the COVID-19 shutdowns are estimated to be 63,402, according to the American Hotel and Lodging Association. UNITE HERE! Local 5 reports that an estimated 9,000 of its members who are hotel workers are unemployed as of May 2020.

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Our analysis shows that workers have sketched a valuable roadmap for the future of tourism in Hawai'i. With hotel closures, laid off hotel workers who are members of UNITE HERE! Local 5 Union set up the Temporary Quarantine Center for the homeless in Iwilei on O'ahu. Members participated in the planning and launch of the facility and continue to provide support with cleaning, laundry and food preparation. This experience has guided their proposed protocols for a safe reopening of hotels. Including hotel workers' input from the front lines at levels of planning, execution, evaluation, and enforcement as equal partners with state and corporate stakeholders will create a win-win situation.² Such an evidence-based process generates standards which will allow workers to return to their jobs confident in their own safety. The protection of hotel industry workers from contracting the virus is intimately tied to the protection of their families and our islands' communities as well as the health and safety of the tourists who visit.³

Worker-generated plans show that pandemic-conscious public health priorities and the state's economic health are complementary, not contradictory. The May 27, 2020 *Civil Beat/Hawaii News Now* poll reflects cautiousness with regard to reopening businesses, with seventy-one percent of participants, including those who are suffering economically, supporting stay-at-home orders to stop community spread of the virus.⁴ Testimonies to the House Select Committee on COVID-19 Economic and Financial Preparedness indicate that reopening tourism will need a plan separate and slower than the state's color-coded

² "Lt. Gov. Josh Green's Group Recommends Screening Travelers for the Coronavirus | Honolulu Star-Advertiser," accessed June 12, 2020, <https://www.staradvertiser.com/2020/06/12/hawaii-news/lt-gov-josh-greens-group-recommends-screening-travelers-for-the-coronavirus/>. Unions representing workers in the hotel industry have not been included in Lt. Gov. Green's hui.

³ Today, we have a special responsibility to take every precaution against this new pandemic in light of other pandemics that had devastating effects on Kānaka Maoli. Smallpox, measles, typhoid fever, Hansen's Disease, and tuberculosis along with sexually transmitted diseases reduced the Native Hawaiian population to 40,000 in 1890 from an estimated one million on contact. See Seth Archer, *Sharks Upon the Land: Colonialism, Indigenous Health, and Culture in Hawai'i, 1778-1855*, Studies in North American Indian History (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

⁴ Chad Blair, "Civil Beat/HNN Poll: Stop Virus Even If Economy Crumbles," Honolulu Civil Beat, May 27, 2020, <https://www.civilbeat.org/2020/05/civil-beat-hnn-poll-stop-virus-even-if-economy-crumbles/> The poll was conducted May 18-20 and surveyed 1,533 registered voters statewide. The poll found that "People earning more than \$100,000, are less supportive of the policies (stay-at-home and quarantine for tourists) than those making less than that figure." We are critical of the article's dichotomous framing of COVID-19 safety measures and economic recovery.

reopening plan.⁵ A recent University of Hawaii Economic Research Organization policy brief clearly states, “Reducing travel to very low levels is important for control of this epidemic because it allows all parties in Hawaii—governments, organizations, individuals, and households—to focus on controlling community transmission.” The authors of the brief remind us that non-tourism businesses constitute seventy-seven percent of the state’s economic activities and point out that “the tourism economy will take longer to restart than the non-tourism economy.”⁶ When we look at the hotel industry through the eyes of those who keep it running, we see opportunities to consider structural changes in conjunction with behavioral changes that will benefit all of Hawai‘i.

Union and Non-Union Workers Together

We present the needs of both unionized and non-unionized hotel workers across the industry as they weigh the risks of returning to work in the midst of the pandemic. Reflecting national trends, workers in Hawai‘i’s hotel industry are economically vulnerable. They work long hours and suffer from occupational injuries. The workforce is made up of immigrants and racial and ethnic minorities. Jobs such as housekeeping are dominated by women, many of whom are heads of households. While unionized workers have better wages (\$24.46 for housekeeping room attendants) and benefits (health and welfare, pension and child or elder care), in a state with one of the highest costs of living in the nation, they have to work more than one job to pay rent and put food on the table.⁷ Hotel workers, in particular, those without the benefits (particularly health insurance), are among the most precariously situated people in Hawai‘i,

⁵ Allison Schaefer, “Hawaii Hits Public Health Benchmarks, but Reopening Plan Requires Longer Wait | Honolulu Star-Advertiser,” *Honolulu Star-Advertiser*, May 26, 2020, <https://www.staradvertiser.com/2020/05/26/breaking-news/state-hits-public-health-benchmarks-but-reopening-plan-requires-longer-wait/>.

⁶ Sumner La Croix and Tim Brown, “How to Control Hawaii’s Coronavirus Epidemic and Bring Back the Economy: The Next Steps,” UHERO, April 4, 2020, <https://uhero.hawaii.edu/how-to-control-hawaiis-coronavirus-epidemic-and-bring-back-the-economy-the-next-steps/>; Ryan Finnerty, “Experts: 77% of Hawai‘i’s Economy Isn’t Tourism; Policymakers Can Take Steps To Reopen It,” Hawai‘i Public Radio, accessed June 12, 2020, <https://www.hawaiipublicradio.org/post/experts-77-hawaiis-economy-isnt-tourism-policymakers-can-take-steps-reopen-it>.

⁷ Department of Business, Economic Development and Tourism Research and Economic Analysis Division, “Hawaii’s Working Population: An Analysis by Industry 2012-2016.” Department of Business, Economic Development and Tourism. Apr. 2018. http://files.hawaii.gov/dbedt/economic/reports/Hawaii_Workforce_Report_2018.pdf, 10, 12, 13; National Low Income Housing Coalition. “Out of Reach: The High Cost of Housing.” 2018. https://nlihc.org/sites/default/files/oor/OOR_2018.pdf, 68. For a Florida State University study that breaks down weekly wages of workers in Hawai‘i’s hospitality and tourism industry county by county see Peterkin, Olivia. “Tourism, Hawaii’s Biggest Industry, is Lowest-paying in the Country, Study Finds.” *Pacific Business News*. 19 Aug. 2019. <https://www.bizjournals.com/pacific/news/2019/08/19/tourism-hawaiis-biggest-industry-is-lowest-paying.html>. Accessed 27 May 2020.

and thus constitute a population who, along with people over sixty, are the most vulnerable to COVID-19. The deadly effect of the virus's comorbidity with untreated illnesses amplifies the dangers of losing health coverage along with jobs.

In the last decade, non-unionized hotels have proliferated across the islands.⁸ Those who work without the collective power of a union are paid poorly (on an average \$4-5/ hour less than their union counterparts) often with no benefits. For the non-union jobs that offer benefits, the workforce is often splintered into many less-than-twenty hours/week positions to avoid the state mandate for insuring Hawai'i workers who work more than twenty hours per week. Consequently, workers are working at two or three jobs, well over twenty hours per week while remaining uninsured and without sick leave, vacations, or other benefits.

One Job should be Enough

These already poor socioeconomic indicators of hotel workers led UNITE HERE! Local 5, which has 12,000 members, to launch its "One Job Should be Enough" campaign in 2018. The campaign was meant for all of Hawai'i's working people. The pandemic-induced job losses have underlined the existing economic, gender and racial disparities that structure the hotel industry. The attendant loss of health insurance (if the workers had it) further exposes this vulnerable group to the consequences of the virus and comorbid conditions. If a resilient economy is the goal, then corporate and state leadership needs to collaborate with workers as necessary partners in the recovery effort.



Health and Safety at Work

In this section, we base our recommendations on the review and comparison of health and safety guidelines from the industry leaders and workers. We also offer lessons from other states that are wrestling with a federal mandate which penalizes workers who have health and safety concerns about returning to their workplaces. We recommend:

- Setting the highest standards in hotel room and food preparation, public area cleaning, and laundry operations to offer the safest lodging for guests and the safest working conditions for employees,

⁸ Together, UNITE HERE! Local 5 and the International Longshore Workers Union have unionized fifty-one hotels in Hawai'i.

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- Opting out of the federal mandate to cut off unemployment for workers who do not feel safe about returning to work,
- Applying the standards industry-wide in union and non-union hotels and vacation rentals.

Since March 2020, Hawai'i's unionized hotel workers under the leadership of UNITE HERE! Local 5 have been laying out health and safety guidelines for the hotel industry to adopt by holding virtual town halls and drafting best practices for hotel safety protocols.⁹ In early April, Local 5 released its "Safe Hotels, Safe Hawaii" guidelines, which are based on public health research and practical experience of workers who set up and continue to operate the Iwilei Temporary Quarantine Center. The guidelines are based upon data collected on cleaning protocols, availability of personal protective equipment, preparedness for social distancing, and mechanisms for monitoring compliance with the protocols. The Local is conducting surveys with workers and management to gather data that will be helpful in adopting and evaluating safety measures. City, county and state leadership needs to put its weight behind these worker-generated guidelines because they provide important strategies and safeguards missing from the safety recommendations of industry leaders.

Workers understand their own safety and they need to feel safe about returning to work. Yet the Federal Department of Labor mandates that states curtail unemployment benefits including Federal Pandemic Unemployment Assistance if an employer recalls an unemployed worker. Federal curtailment of benefits has resulted in several states setting up "snitch lines" for employers to report workers who refuse to return to work out of safety concerns.¹⁰ Hawai'i's employers and legislators need to show leadership by opting out of the reporting system so that workers can make health-based decisions rather than acting out of economic fear which endangers all.¹¹

⁹ James Hardway and Scott Miscovich, "Safe Hotels, Safe Hawai'i: Operational Guidelines for Safe Hotel Operations in Pandemic Conditions." UNITE HERE! Local 5. 10 Apr. 2020. <https://www.unitehere5.org/wp-content/uploads/2020.04.10-Safe-Hotels-Safe-Hawaii-Operational-Guidelines-FINAL.pdf>. Accessed 8 May 2020. These best practices came from the hands-on experience of UNITE HERE! Local 5 members in setting up and continuing to support the Temporary Quarantine Center for the homeless in Iwilei. The Local has also consulted the UNITE HERE! guidelines for the Hotel, Gaming and Food Services Facilities, the epidemiological best practices recommended by the Center for Disease Control and the World Health Organization for health risks posed by COVID and SARS, and Wynn Resorts Las Vegas health and sanitation guidelines.

¹⁰ Judd Legum, "Return to Work, or Else," Popular Information, accessed May 28, 2020, <https://popular.info/p/return-to-work-or-else>; Janus Rose, "This Script Sends Junk Data to Ohio's Website for Snitching on Workers," *Vice* (blog), May 8, 2020, https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/wxqemy/this-script-sends-junk-data-to-ohios-website-for-snitching-on-workers; "Can Employees Refuse to Return to Work Because of COVID-19?," *The National Law Review*, accessed May 28, 2020, <https://www.natlawreview.com/article/can-employees-refuse-to-return-to-work-because-covid-19>.

¹¹ US Department of Labor, "Unemployment Insurance Relief During COVID-19 Outbreak," <https://www.dol.gov/coronavirus/unemployment-insurance#faq> under heading "I was furloughed;" Employment

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Union and non-union workplaces and vacation rentals need to implement worker-employer collaborative plans across the board for recovery to be effective. Partial industry compliance exponentially spreads contagious disease. Only workers (both union and non-union), management, and legislators all working together as allies will lead to the robust planning, execution, and enforcement necessary for success.



Structural Change

Workers, employers and legislators need to restructure aspects of the hotel industry in order to recover in the new COVID-19 landscape. Evidence-based behavioral responses to the pandemic (physical distance, frequent handwashing, sanitization, thermal screening, self-reporting symptoms, contact tracing and quarantine) are necessary but not sufficient. Here, we lay out steps that build on long-term demands that hotel employees have made to improve the conditions under which they work as well as practices, tried and tested in other states, to respond to the specific challenges of COVID-19 for the hotel industry. We propose the following in keeping with local and national discussions:

- Paid sick leave, health care for all, employer sanctions to safeguard workers from losing their unemployment benefits if they have concerns about safely returning to work,
- Redesign of hotels rooms and congregate spaces and reorganization of workload so that employees can meet COVID-19 cleaning standards without overworking or injuries,
- Part-time work opportunities with continued unemployment support and health insurance (work-share options),
- Worker-led training and monitoring of safety guidelines without fear of retaliation when workers report non-compliance.

Corporate responsibility toward their workers as well as legislative resolve at the city, county, and state level will be required to put these bold but necessary policies in place. Despite widespread prescriptions that hoteliers prioritize worker health and wellbeing as they reopen,¹² ample evidence shows that downsizing and cutting losses often outweigh employee

and Training Administration, "Unemployment Insurance Program Letter No. 23-20" (US Department of Labor, May 11, 2020), https://wdr.doleta.gov/directives/attach/UIPL/UIPL_23-20.pdf. Accessed 28 May 2020.

¹² For two examples, see Hospitality Net, "COVID-19 Crisis Forces Hoteliers to Review Their Human Resources Strategies | By Alex Sogno," Hospitality Net, accessed June 11, 2020, ; "What Hotels Must Learn from Hospitals for the New Reality of Tourism," World Economic Forum, accessed June 11, 2020, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/05/lessons-from-hospitals-to-the-hospitality-sector-covid-19/>; "How

wellness in the COVID-19 workplace. Returning service sector workers nationwide often find themselves in situations of reduced hours, pay, and benefits combined with increased workloads in the name of necessary efficiency.¹³ The pandemic conditions, which are magnifying returning low-wage workers' existing economic hardship and health risks, become instructive for the hospitality industry. Improving the health and wellbeing of workers through better working conditions pays off by signaling a tourist destination's reputation for safety. For the good of everyone, including employers, workers must play an equal role in designing and monitoring the workplace conditions under which they labor.¹⁴

Paid Sick Leave and Healthcare For All

If the state, county, city and corporate leadership understand that workers' safety is intimately tied to that of Hawai'i's communities and tourists, then paid sick leave for all types of illness, not just the temporary exception provided by the Families First Coronavirus Response Act for COVID-19 related symptoms, rises to the top along with universal health insurance replacing the current "over-twenty-hours" loophole.

Hawai'i should set an example by sanctioning employers who deny unemployment benefits to workers who are not returning to their jobs because they do not feel safe. The enormity of job losses as a result of the pandemic has revealed the limits of employer-provided health care. All those who are jobless also find themselves without health insurance. Employees who are working shorter hours, such as HMSHost workers at Hawai'i's airports, no longer have health coverage because their employers are not paying their share of the insurance.

This will not be the last public health crisis we are likely to face and it is necessary to rethink this model of health care provision. Workers who have been laid off, especially those who are not unionized, need the assurance first that they will be able to maintain their health and second that they will be able to return to work safely.

COVID-19 Can Stimulate Healthier Hospitality Leadership," *TravelDailyNews International*, accessed June 11, 2020, <https://www.traveldailynews.com/post/how-covid-19-can-stimulate-healthier-hospitality-leadership>.

¹³ Tony Romm, "'I Don't Know If That Counts as a Job': Fewer Hours, Less Pay and More Anxiety Greet Returning Workers," *Washington Post*, accessed June 11, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2020/06/06/workers-pay-cuts-coronavirus/>; Eric Morath and Rachel Feintzeig, "'I Have Bills I Have to Pay.' Low-Wage Workers Face Brunt of Coronavirus Crisis," *Wall Street Journal*, March 20, 2020, sec. US, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/i-have-bills-i-have-to-pay-low-wage-workers-face-brunt-of-coronavirus-crisis-11584719927>.

¹⁴ John Logan, "Union Busting During a Pandemic Could Prove Lethal to Workers," *Truthout*, accessed June 11, 2020, <https://truthout.org/articles/union-busting-during-a-pandemic-could-prove-lethal-to-workers/>.

Hotel Design and Workload

The hotel industry leaders need to rethink the pressures of full room occupancy as well as room design if physical distancing and the necessary and elevated sanitation procedures detailed in the “Safe Hawai’i, Safe Hotels” operational guidelines are to be effective. The additional workload created by increased care with sanitation means that hotels have to reduce the current room quotas assigned to every housekeeper. Corporations will need to invest in room redesign to make workloads doable. For example, extra care needs to be taken with the heavy curtains, cloth upholstery in furniture, and mattresses. Porous and excess materials (such as extra linen, extra toilet paper, accessories and furniture) need to be reduced to a minimum. High contact surfaces need to be rethought in terms of best practices for sanitation. Workers, having pointed these things out, are best situated to plan, execute, and evaluate the changes needed. To clean at the levels required by the pandemic guidelines without a drop in the room quota assigned to housekeepers will exacerbate the injuries workers already suffer at their jobs because of the pace of their work and increase stress levels with their attendant health impacts which make people more vulnerable to COVID-19 and comorbid illnesses that multiply the dangers of the virus.

Work Sharing

In recognition of the additional responsibilities for working families whose children are at home because of daycare, school and summer camp closures, we recommend work sharing as an option to be explored for those who may have to work part-time because of caregiving responsibilities. This program allows workers to work part-time, keep their health benefits, while also being eligible under a recent US Department of Labor policy for \$600/week pandemic benefit as part of the federal CARES Act until the end of July 2020. A work-share program has been used in Wisconsin since the Great Recession and can be a policy direction for workers, employers, and legislators to consider.

Worker-Led Safety

Workers are the best monitors of how well the health and safety protocols are being followed by management, guests and themselves, so worker empowerment is essential to the success of recovery. Models have emerged in states like Minnesota and Wisconsin. Workers have constituted themselves into safety committees and trained themselves in COVID-19 safety protocols appropriate for their workplaces. In Wisconsin, the safety committees formed by meat packers are working with their local Occupational Safety and Health Administration and the Governor’s office to be certified to do safety checks. In other contexts, as with Minneapolis Amazon workers, the worker safety committees run independently. They have made positive

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gains for worker safety by publicizing poor and unsafe workplace conditions.¹⁵ Training and authorizing workers to monitor and evaluate health and safety standards in hotels and treating workers as partners will minimize risky practices that promote virus spread.

Protection for workers against retaliation from employers for reporting violations needs to be built into the process. Anonymous or privacy-protected hotlines where employees can report employer violations with the expectation of a corrective response is crucial for public health. The Hawai'i Lodging and Tourism Association (HLTA) proposes that "employee health guidance" -- which the employers construct and enforce -- be "non-punitive."¹⁶ But this falls short of meeting worker -- and industry -- needs for protection against employers that violate agreed-upon standards or retaliate for exposing the same.¹⁷

The HLTA's health, safety and security guidelines need to align with Local 5's experience-based approach so that worker, guest, and community safety set the industry standards. If HLTA wants to rebrand Hawai'i as the "healthiest destination in the world," then, for everyone's benefit, the answer to "healthy for whom?" needs to center workers and residents and provide safe channels to report problems and act on those reports.

Empowering worker committees to independently certify their workplaces as clean and safe will go a long way in building the confidence of tourists. Workers involved in framing the solutions to structural and behavioral challenges to reopening are necessary for any plan to work. The result will be a healthier community and a healthier, more sustainable industry.



¹⁵ "East African Workers Demand Safer Working Conditions at Amazon's Egan Warehouse," *MPR News*, accessed May 29, 2020, <https://www.mprnews.org/story/2018/06/04/east-african-workers-demand-safer-working-conditions-at-amazons-egan-warehouse>; "Amazon Warehouse Workers Say They Have Been Working Without Air Conditioning, Experiencing Exhaustion and Dehydration," *Money*, accessed May 29, 2020, <https://money.com/amazon-minnesota-workplace/>.

¹⁶ Hawai'i Lodging & Tourism Association, "Covid-19 Health, Safety, & Security Standards: Creating the Healthiest Destination in the World," Hawaii Lodging and Tourism Association, accessed May 29, 2020, <http://www.hawaiilodging.org/covid-191.html>.

¹⁷ The fact that retaliation is an employer tactic is well documented. During the pandemic, it has been used to discredit worker's concerns about theirs and their coworkers' health. For one recent example among many, see Rachel Sandler, "Leaked Memo Reveals Amazon Exec Called Fired Warehouse Organizer 'Not Smart Or Articulate,'" *Forbes*, accessed May 29, 2020, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/rachelsandler/2020/04/02/leaked-memo-reveals-amazon-exec-called-fired-warehouse-organizer-not-smart-or-articulate/>.

Conclusion

Our recommendations require structural transformations not just the behavioral changes that have occupied the central place in legislative and corporate discussions about how to open up spaces of commerce where people congregate. Since putting common good above self-interested behavior and action has been the biggest lesson this pandemic has taught us, we ask those who will be reading this document to consider what a social scientific imagination would require when we put humanity first. When we understand the economy not as the disembodied interplay of supply and demand but as shifting constellations of human and social interactions, we can start work toward the common goal of reducing disparities and distress. This pandemic may eventually push us to look seriously into long-term calls to diversify our state's economy, provide healthcare for all and introduce work that is secure and better paid.



More Information

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About Dr. Das Gupta: Dr. Das Gupta grew up in Kolkata, India, and received her Ph.D. in Sociology at Brandeis University. She has been teaching at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa for 18 years. She specializes in immigration to the United States and immigrant-led movements for labor, racial and gender justice. Her research addresses the organization of work through the lens of gender and race. All of her research is closely tied to community-based organizing.

About Dr. Rath: Dr. Rath received his Ph.D. in History at Brandeis University. He has been a faculty member at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa since 2002. He is an Atlantic historian and a scholar-teacher of new media and sound studies. He attends to the senses to uncover different ways that race and ethnicity are created, maintained, and socially mediated. Before entering academia, Dr. Rath worked in the hotel and restaurant industry as a line cook and sous chef for fifteen years.

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