

In a Space of Limitations, Kempe Center Creates Opportunities ^[1]



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For many event planners, Covid-19 presented the ultimate challenge. How could we engage constituents through special events if we couldn't see people face to face? While many units were able to pivot to fully virtual or hybrid events with success, larger events, such as the CU Anschutz Kempe Center's annual conference on child welfare, were faced with a true dilemma. With an in-person event already scheduled with an expected attendance of 400-500 guests, could they pivot to a virtual event in only five months, and if yes, would it be successful?

"Where many people saw the pandemic as presenting limitations," reflects Lisa Merkel-Holgiun, Associate Professor and Director of the National Center on Family Group Decision Making at the Kempe Center, "we tried to think of it as an opportunity to expand our reach." Knowing that the child welfare system is essential but also slow to evolve in terms of practice and outcomes, the Kempe Center team was inspired to make big changes while the pace of society was necessarily slowing. "Given the issues of racial disparities and disproportionality, economic inequalities, and social justice that plague the child welfare system, we knew we needed to issue a global call to action," Merkel-Holgiun states, "because if we couldn't inspire change now, we'd lose the opportunity." The Kempe team was inspired by New York Times columnist David Brooks who encouraged the Aspen Institute's Weavers--a group Merkel-Holgiun is a part of--to leverage the pandemic for mass societal change.

Recognizing that they'd need a robust platform to bring attendees together for a powerful virtual experience, the Kempe Center team reached out to eComm to learn more about Cvent's CrowdCompass app. The app, which is available as an add-on purchase to current Cvent license holders, seamlessly connects with the existing registration experience but provides event attendees opportunities to maximize their event attendance, even in a virtual setting.

“We knew that hosting a virtual conference might lead to higher participant numbers due to removal of financial and travel barriers,” recalls Mary Gangel, Marketing Communications Manager at the Kempe Center, “so we realized we’d need to be creative and intentional in terms of our content.” Her colleague Merkel-Holguin adds, “We asked people to come curious, to come ready for conversation. We knew that our attendees would bring substantial knowledge to the table, but we needed to use it in a way that would allow us to move the needle in a field that is slow to change.”

With all this in mind, the Kempe team of six employees began creating a virtual conference that would truly break barriers:

- The Kempe Center welcomed 1,400 attendees from 20 countries for four days of programming that ran for 18-hours/day to provide live content to people around the world.
- The team developed diverse, engaging content for attendees with 275 sessions including lectures, poetry readings, musical performances, movie and video screenings, discussion groups, and conversation circles around sensitive topics.
- Abstract Management and a speaker portal allowed speakers to manage their own content and materials, thus reducing the logistical burden in hosting such a large, complex event.
- A team of 40 session moderators worked to ensure that a live host was available in every session, and a Kempe concierge team checked into every session to ensure that programming was occurring as planned. The concierge team was also available throughout each days’ events to answer questions and to help participants navigate the conference.
- Over 160 sessions were recorded and posted on the same day it occurred in an on-demand library. The content remains active there for one-year after the conference date so that key conversations can continue.

Additionally, the virtual conference allowed the Kempe Center to open the door to a new attendee group: foster parents, adoptive parents, kin, and young people who experienced the child welfare system. “Opening the door to people and families with lived experience was crucial,” Merkel-Holgiun recalls. “Foundation support allowed us to bring these groups into our circle of change through a grant-based attendance model so that their expertise could be part of these critical conversations.”

As the 2021 virtual event approaches, the Kempe team has secured strategic partnerships with foundations and national and international organizations to build an even more inclusive, thought provocative event this year. This year, there are 8 keynotes, 25 international exchanges with leaders from the US, Canada, UK, Netherlands, Spain, New Zealand, and Australia, 8 media circles, and close to 180 conversation circles and workshops where participants will discuss and debate new ideas. The team is planning for 2,000 this year to join the expanded virtual space.

“The Kempe Center was foundational to formalizing through practice, policy and training the international child protection movement, starting in 1962 with C. Henry Kempe’s paper on the Battered Child Syndrome,” Merkel-Holgiun states. “Our voice is critical to the ongoing conversation and multidisciplinary approach, both nationally and internationally. Together, we will move the needle for the betterment of children, families and communities.”

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