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## Event planners make COVID concerns a priority

By [Christin Yates](#), Special to the Daily Memphian

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**The grand opening celebration for Collage Dance Collective was held over three days to permit guests with various health concerns to participate within their comfort level.** (Mark Weber/The Daily Memphian)

COVID-19 is forcing organizations to make tough decisions on whether to hold in-person events. Some companies remain completely virtual while others are beginning to host events. While things seem to change daily, companies must be ready to make strategic decisions and determine how best to move forward with their plans safely.

“Meeting planners are having to work diligently internally with their HR departments to register attendees for conferences and events and gather medical information (mostly vaccine-related) to see if the attendee is allowed to attend, based on the information submitted,” Cindy Brewer, principal of LEO Events, said.

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## AutoZone holds first large event at Renasant Convention Center since renovation

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When the pandemic hit in 2020, Brewer said LEO, a nationwide event planning company based in Memphis, was fortunate to have a digital product available, although it had not yet been launched. Brewer said it was their “saving grace.”

“The majority of our clients in the third quarter of 2020 started pivoting to a virtual option, and that still continues through today,” she said. “Some major clients are making decisions to go live, and they’re very adamant about it, and we’re there for them live, and we’re there for the ones who are virtual and hybrid as well.”

The pandemic also brought a new meaning to “event safety.” Safety, prior to COVID-19, meant considering the possibility of a mass shooting, a disgruntled employee or a threat to a building. While those remain safety concerns, public health came to the forefront of the conversation.



**In-person events present a special challenge for Collage Dance Collective because many of the students are too young to be vaccinated, executive director Marcellus Harper said.** (Mark Weber/The Daily Memphian)

“Public health prior to 2020 was just not a discussion that anyone was having at all in the industry,” Brewer said. “We all had to shift gears and decide what roles we were going to play. One of the roles that evolved was COVID safety officers for our organization who consult with clients who choose to meet live.”

Through consulting with medical professionals across the U.S. and conducting extensive research, LEO Events understands that temperature checks are not effective, although that was the way of life for a while.

“People are recommending that organizations invest in three to four different types of COVID testing options,” she said. “One will give results 36 hours in advance, and a rapid test is done in 15 minutes.”

LEO had an internal meeting in July 2021 for its 60 employees. Everyone had to be COVID

tested to enter the building on Day One, and tests were sent home with each employee for their loved ones.

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Faith Morris, chief marketing and external affairs officer and Freedom Award managing director/producer for the National Civil Rights Museum, said it remains important to consider the safest route for employees and guests.

Last year, the National Civil Rights Museum canceled its annual Freedom Award event, which started when the museum opened in 1991. This year, the Freedom Award, which is honoring former First Lady Michelle Obama and the Poor People's Campaign, will be held virtually on Oct. 14.

"There was a window this summer when things were looking good, and that lasted about two weeks," Morris said. "We'll stage the Freedom Award live and stream it to our global audience. We have a really beautiful event that our guests will be able to enjoy virtually."

Morris said the key is to be nimble and be willing to adjust at any time to changing mandates.

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### Michelle Obama, Poor People's Campaign among Freedom Award honorees

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"We keep an eye on the numbers and the trends," she said. "Our whole senior team is tasked with making sure that in every aspect of what we do and people we interact with that we have this pandemic filter on how we move forward."

Marcellus Harper, executive director of Collage Dance Collective, says he understands the varying levels of safety concerns and willingness to attend in-person events. Therefore, the recent grand opening weekend for Collage Dance had a little something for everyone.

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"We decided to make the grand opening three days to really create different

experiences for a diverse subsection of our community to engage, from the older and younger to the immunocompromised,” Harper said. “We really tried to create different events to meet people where they were, and that was the rationale for doing it over three days.”

The grand opening celebration Sept. 23-25 began with an outdoor ribbon-cutting ceremony held in person, an indoor gala requiring both negative COVID tests and vaccination status confirmed, as well as an outdoor community event.



**Collage Dance Collective students preform outdoors on Thursday, Sept. 23, 2021.** (Mark Weber/The Daily Memphian)

“The gala was probably the riskiest of the three days because the gala has a sit-down dinner component. Our way to navigate that was to require everyone who’s attending to show proof of vaccination and present a negative COVID test within 72 hours of the event,” Harper said. “Not everyone was excited about this, but that’s why we had different events.”

He noted that Collage Dance serves hundreds of kids under the age of 12 who cannot be vaccinated.

“We felt we had to be vigilant and do our very best,” Harper said. “Even with requiring vaccines and tests, the risk is not zero, but it was the best that we could do.”

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