



WELCOMING
INTERNATIONAL

STORIES OF RESILIENCE:

Germany

A flexible, creative and
responsive approach
to the pandemic

CREDITS

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This publication is part of the case study series *Stories of Resilience* published by Welcoming America as part of its Welcoming International initiative. The contents are based on conversations with Claudia Walther (Bertelsmann Stiftung) and Samera Bartsch (PHINEO), Project Managers of the Weltoffene Kommune initiative; Mohamed Sayed, Integration Officer in the municipality of Nordhausen; and Alexander Pongracz, Integration Officer in the municipality of Kaiserslautern.

Background

In the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, the German municipalities of Kaiserslautern and Nordhausen put their experience of “welcoming work” and membership in the [Weltoffene Kommune](#) initiative to the test as they worked toward a more inclusive and effective emergency response in their respective regions.

Kaiserslautern is part of urban West Germany, while Nordhausen is located in the more rural East German region of Thuringia. Despite their regional differences, they both converted to digital formats to expand and maintain the connections within their community, and with other regions, while also utilizing a dedicated and interdisciplinary crisis team to respond to urgent local challenges.

The Weltoffene Kommune initiative promotes welcoming by supporting municipalities in Germany with the further development of their integration and diversity work. It is a member of the Welcoming International initiative run by the U.S.-based nonprofit organization Welcoming America.

The pandemic put Weltoffene Kommune’s efforts at risk by interrupting the process of meetings between various stakeholders and administrative departments. Additionally, local governments were required to divert their attention to tracking infection, as well as transferring social resources to the health department.

As 2020 progressed, stricter measures and lockdowns forced Weltoffene Kommune to switch all its offerings to digital, including the three pillars of their approach: the Self-Check workshop (Selbstcheck), Dialogue events (Dialogveranstaltungen), and Strengthening Municipal Decision Makers (Stärkung kommunaler Entscheidungsträger*innen).

The Weltoffene Kommune’s contacts within municipalities had become overburdened by their additional workload, and therefore more difficult to reach. In Kaiserslautern alone, 70% to 80% of the projects focusing on integration collapsed due to financial cuts or the redirection of staff and resources towards urgent crisis response.

In response to these challenges, PHINEO and Bertelsmann Stiftung—entities that jointly lead the initiative—conducted research to identify the shifts in local needs and potential changes to the long-term visions of Weltoffene Kommune members. In order to maintain the quality of the collaborations, they scaled down some of their efforts, modifying and updating plans that had been made before the pandemic.

Regional differences caused some concern, since some of the rural communities in East Germany were less equipped and had fewer digital resources at their disposal. Similarly, communities that are more geographically remote had delayed contact with the coronavirus, and therefore have more recently converted to online meetings, requiring them to secure access to webcams for the first time.

To maintain participation in their welcoming programs, Weltoffene Kommune employed diverse communication strategies to comply with fluctuating safety measures, including: regular check-ins with partners, hybrid (in-person and digital) meeting formats, and increased evaluation and planning.

The pandemic also provided an opportunity to restructure and reorganize internally, as well as improve remote collaboration and information access between the two organizations. PHINEO and Bertelsmann Stiftung shifted towards shorter but more frequent meetings to help everyone retain focus. Additionally, their frameworks shifted towards a collective response to stressful situations, and they began to monitor how the team was coping emotionally in order to mitigate the pandemic’s impact on personal well-being.

Ingredients for Success

#1 BUILDING ON COLLECTIVE EXPERIENCES AND PREVIOUS WELCOMING WORK

In Nordhausen, two to three bombs from World War II are found every year, requiring the city to completely evacuate under the assistance of the fire department and other organizations. These highly responsive crisis teams shifted their efforts towards pandemic-related challenges, allowing for effective local management of the crisis.

Similarly in Kaiserslautern, the administration drew on the expertise of the former Staff Unit for Asylum (“Stabstelle Asyl”) to coordinate care for elderly citizens and other at-risk groups. This team was considered to have the most valuable experience for supporting people in crisis, since they had managed peak refugee arrivals in Germany between 2014–2016. Faced with an unpredictable pandemic, they decided to focus on implementing structures of emergency care for those who were in danger of being cut off from their regular networks.

Alexander Pongracz, Integration Officer in Kaiserslautern, recalls: “From day one, we formed an interdisciplinary crisis team, which consists of a permanent group of employees from the municipal administration, and a changing roster of guest experts. We hold at least one cross-thematic meeting per week—in the beginning the number was two, or even up to three—and the topics for discussion depend on the ongoing development of the pandemic, and the directives from the state that need to be implemented at a local level.”

#2 CREATING HYBRID MEETING SPACES TO GUARANTEE INCLUSIVITY

In Thuringia, where a high number of infections occurred relatively late in the pandemic, a hybrid meeting format was deployed, bridging digital communication and face-to-face gatherings. Developed in collaboration between the Nordhausen municipality and Weltoffene Kommune, it proved successful because both local residents and stakeholders appreciated that the Bertelsmann team were willing to travel and attend in person. They saw this as an assertion that locals were considered to be valuable partners in the conversation.

Mohamed Sayed, Integration Officer in Nordhausen recalls: “We organized a meeting with the Weltoffene Kommune, where we designed safety measures collectively. The PHINEO representative from Berlin joined us remotely to reduce risk, while the Bertelsmann Stiftung representative was able to attend in person, so we had a mixed format of physical and digital presence in one package. We believe that the community really appreciated the fact that the Bertelsmann representative was able to come, and it contributed a lot to the success of the event. It showed that they were willing to make the investment to come to us.”

For a small, remote community like Nordhausen, the presence of key stakeholders amplified the urgency of welcoming work and brought other members of the community on board with the programs.

Claudia Walther from Bertelsmann Stiftung recalls that a community from another region developed a similar hybrid format in order to overcome access barriers for certain participant groups. Members of the Migration Advisory Board and older adults met on site, while most of the other stakeholders were virtually attending from home. Samera Bartsch from PHINEO attended a session that took place outside, while in another larger city 30 people on another occasion, sitting two meters apart from one another and speaking through microphones.

#3 INVESTING IN DIGITAL SPACES AND DIGITAL SUPPORT

The Weltoffene Kommune worked closely with moderators and advisors who already had experience with digital meetings. They organized meetings to collect information on the barriers that Weltoffene Kommune members might experience if meetings moved online, and then worked with them closely to coordinate responses.

Claudia Walther gave an example: “In one municipal administration, an officer said over the phone, ‘I have never done anything like this before, never used Zoom or other things’. I offered to test it with them by sending a link that we could try out for half an hour. The officer was thrilled, and now we have already done two Zoom workshops there. In Pforzheim we also did two digital workshops—it worked upon encouragement.”

Again, some participants in Nordhausen felt anxious about using Zoom, as it requires shifts in social dynamics and forces conversations to become more formal. Sayed observed: “People are used to face-to-face events when you can speak as you like, but it doesn’t work the same for digital events. Participants do not always pick up the new rules right away.”

It was apparent that shifting to an entirely digital event proved challenging at first and could not replace all of the benefits of face-to-face meetings. In the long run, however, cutting out travel time—whether cross-country or international—increased productivity, and left more time and resources to address local emergencies.

We communicated with our funding agency to secure a video camera, and this enabled us to bridge the gap and recruit online. We were able to put the whole project on the website and establish direct contact with our trainers.

— Mohamed Sayed, Integration Officer in Nordhausen

Community groups also explored the use of digital tools in order to continue with their work. Pongracz, an Integration Officer from Kaiserslautern, noted that some local organizations that were already very community-oriented and active in their networks (such as church groups and sports teams) were quick to offer their support during the pandemic.

One church group created an email distribution list, which enabled community members to offer tips and resources on subjects such as homeschooling, hiking (with printable maps), illustrated poems, etc. These small gestures acted as mood lifters and contributed to making people feel less lonely and isolated.

Additionally, Kaiserslautern made use of the Integreat app, which is free for migrants and can be used offline. The app also supports three languages: Arabic, English, and German. The municipality has used the first button on the main page to link to the latest COVID-19 information and advice, and the app has become an essential communication tool for distributing local updates to migrant communities.

#4 A FLEXIBLE AND CREATIVE APPROACH TO ACCOMMODATE ALL

The Weltoffene Kommune approach to welcoming is through constant learning, the adaptation of tools, and the self-evaluation of perspectives. This flexible approach was put to the test when the pandemic forced local municipalities to rethink their communication strategies in order to continue with their work.

Nordhausen was one municipality that was quick to realize a more flexible and creative approach was needed in order to maintain the participation of the local community in their welcoming programs.

When the pandemic reached us, the questions that we asked ourselves were whether we could achieve our goals digitally, and if we could then have the same impact as in a face-to-face program. We always ranked the meetings according to their urgency level, and considered if an in-person meeting would lead to a more efficient impact. Then we tried to either adapt the space, which means finding larger spaces for smaller groups, or to create a controlled seating arrangement so that chains of infection could be tracked back if necessary. That is where people got creative.

— Mohamed Sayed, Integration Officer in Nordhausen

To make sure that vital information reached everyone in Nordhausen, the municipality worked with the local media, with whom they have a long-established relationship. The press reported on crisis team briefings several times a day, and became the main communication channel between politicians, the administration, and the local population.

In order to disseminate similar information to a broad spectrum of residents in Kaiserslautern, they utilized a multi-layered communication strategy which included: the design and distribution of informative posters to pharmacies, shared accommodations, supermarkets, and bus networks; collaboration with housing companies to directly contact their elderly tenants; in-community research to identify areas of emergency; broadcasts on public radio stations.

When it was safe to do so they also adjusted their meeting spaces to allow for social distancing measures, with one of the early meetings accommodating 35 participants in a soccer field-sized room with open doors and windows for ventilation.

While in-person meetings in Nordhausen generated a desire to come together and participate, a similar set-up in Kaiserslautern resulted in a number of cancellations caused by a fear of catching the coronavirus. This underlines the belief of Weltoffene Kommune that each partnership has to incorporate a tailored and flexible approach, and strategies and methodologies need to be designed with adaptability in mind.

#5 PLACING COMMUNITY AT THE FOREFRONT OF INCLUSIVE RESILIENCE-BUILDING

Collaboration already starts when I send out an email, or create a distribution list: who I am thinking about, but also who I am maybe not thinking about.

— Alexander Pongracz, Integration Officer in Kaiserslautern

In Kaiserslautern, the crisis team's creative approach to communication quickly resulted in more offers of support than requests for support. They focused on implementing emergency care for at-risk people who were in danger of being cut off from their usual networks. Flyers, posters, and the local press were used to attract volunteers and material donations from a wide range of local institutions, such as FC Kaiserslautern soccer club, churches, and student groups that organized within university departments. Investing directly

in the recruitment of these kinds of organizations had a snowball effect, as they promoted the message within their own networks and brought more people on board.

The crisis team stepped up to manage oversight, personnel, and resources by launching a website landing page, hotlines, and information center staffed by established team members, as well as new recruits. They also designed online registration forms for capturing requests for assistance and offers to help. Finally, they worked with various community associations to disseminate information in multiple languages.

Over time, the team observed that the demand for their support decreased as family and community structures—some of which were newly established—became self-managing structures. In other situations where, for example, people could not access food after a hospital stay because of the extreme load on nursing services, they made referrals to the corresponding specialist unit at the municipal administration; in less critical cases, they were referred to social counseling services.

#6 SHARING INFORMATION AND RESOURCES

Kaiserslautern is often called “a city of short distances” because of its proximity to various institutions and the town hall, which are all within walking distance.

As an Integration Officer, Pongracz personally knows the representatives of all these institutions. They often share knowledge and resources among each other, and their practice of regular meetings continued during the pandemic. He reiterates that “the city government has the best opportunity—and therefore, the obligation—to gather information about processes, overall numbers, population data, and so on. But we must not sit on these findings; instead, we must share them as openly and widely as possible with the experts, the stakeholders. These agents are then in contact with the local people, exchanging information and working on projects, and then we get feedback from them.”

Takeaways

Below are some takeaways from these case studies that municipalities and national networks of welcoming communities can consider applying in their work:

For national welcoming networks:

- Although it seemed challenging at first, goals can be generated and plans can be implemented within a digital environment.
- A flexible, intuitive, and adaptable approach is key to successful implementation of the program.
- The pandemic revealed how to establish better lines of communication between different populations of migrants and nonmigrants. The crisis made problems more visible, but it also presented advantages more clearly.
- Networking needs a basis of trust, and it works best when people get to know each other and find their own frameworks for cooperation.
- Although video calls don't measure up to some aspects of face-to-face meetings, they can be much more personal than telephone meetings or conference calls that were common before the pandemic. They brought teams closer to many of the stakeholders with whom they work.
- A new normal has become established in the actions of local governments, offering the opportunity to promote greater interdepartmental cooperation.
- It's key to provide information in multiple languages.

For municipalities:

- The administration needs to remain open, even when everyone else is closed. It must be accessible to all and provide concise information. It is necessary to take precautions to ensure that staff are always available on site.
- When possible, face-to-face meetings should be organized in addition to the online meetings, not instead of them.
- It is important to assess gaps and what can be improved, based on data and analysis, to inform future responses.
- Every municipality should have an emergency structure in place that can come together quickly over issues, and be able to make top-level decisions with or on behalf of the administration. It should be interdisciplinary and as knowledgeable as possible with regards to the current situation. If this team only comes together for the first time during a crisis situation, it is a missed opportunity for connection.
- In a crisis, people should work in a consensus-oriented way. Resolutions should be made quickly and pragmatically. Collaboration should be unconditional, trusting, and cross political parties, including senior-level officials from the local government, as well as relevant expert consultants and stakeholders.
- Cramped housing conditions during the pandemic have created additional stressors for all those affected, and there have been reports of increased domestic violence. There have also been severe breaks in language learning and opportunities for social integration. A key priority should be supporting improved mental health and well-being through courses and learning opportunities such as cooking events, and opportunities to meet one another.
- Rather than simply proposing projects, municipalities need to remain open to receiving project proposals from people outside the institution who can bring benefit to people who have been severely impacted.
- It is apparent that it will be important to focus on topics such as everyday and structural racism.

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