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STORIES OF IMPACT: NEXUS COMMUNITY PARTNERS

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We encourage you to share your feedback with us and tell us how you are using the tool or resource. Nexus Community Engagement Institute and our partners intend these documents and tools to introduce practitioners, funders, evaluators, and community members to community engagement and to give the field clarity in its language and principles. However, community engagement is not a field that can rely on written materials alone; it takes a community of practitioners to support one another in practicing community engagement effectively, meeting its challenges, and tapping the strengths within each unique context. We encourage you to seek out experienced practitioners to support you in implementing these tools, principles, and concepts.

Nexus Community Engagement Institute is available for consultation. Please contact us at www.nexuscp.org/ncei or email NCEI@nexuscp.org.

Nexus Community Engagement Institute is continuing the work of the Building the Field of Community Engagement (BTF) collaborative. The BTF collaborative was a partnership between Casa de Esperanza, the Cultural Wellness Center, Hope Community, Lyndale Neighborhood Association, the Native American Community Development Institute, and Nexus Community Partners.



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NEXUS COMMUNITY PARTNERS

Building the Field of Community

Engagement is a collaborative initiative designed to magnify and elevate the power of community engagement to change the way problems are solved and resources are invested. Building the Field is bolstering the work of community engagement practitioners and encouraging other organizations to integrate community engagement into their work. As part of the project, the partners produced a film, *Community at the Center*, which discusses the core principles and values of this important work. They also host the Engaged Learning Series, which are community conversations on critical community engagement topics. This report is part of a series of tools and stories that document the partners' and other practitioners' expertise and learning. Find us at www.buildthefield.org.

Building the Field partners:

Casa de Esperanza
Cultural Wellness Center
Hope Community
Lyndale Neighborhood Association
Native American Community
Development Institute
Nexus Community Partners



Traditional community development work focuses on the built environment. **Nexus Community Partners** believes that community development should also be mindful of the people who live in and interact with the built environment every day. Nexus also believes that neighborhood-based development activities will only be successful in the long term if they are paired with strong community engagement efforts. To that end, Nexus supports community-based organizations in low-wealth neighborhoods to engage with and to reflect the vision and creativity of the people who live and work there. Nexus also supports organizations that wish to integrate community engagement into their organizations and into their programming.

In 2009, a community development organization that manages scattered-site affordable housing called Urban Homeworks approached Nexus for financial support. Through a series of conversations, questions and strategic interventions over the following years, Nexus helped Urban Homeworks change the way it works to ensure that residents are more powerfully positioned as decision-makers in their communities. This story documents the milestones that mark Urban Homeworks' ongoing transformation, highlights the power of engagement to create better outcomes, and affirms the importance of funders and intermediaries like Nexus, which understand the critical value of community engagement in creating more vibrant communities.



Nexus Community Partners staff: Back row: Danielle Mkali, Chai Lee, Theresa Gardella, Larry Hiscock, Repa Mekha, Elena Gaarder. Front row: Felicia Ring, Terri Thao, Jocelyn Leung, Lynette Condra

THE NEXUS/URBAN HOMEWORKS RELATIONSHIP

Nexus describes its unique blend of wealth-building and engagement as “community building.” The organization believes that good community development will be bolstered by strengthening the social, cultural and human capital of residents to engage more fully in their neighborhood and to take advantage of all of its economic potential.

Community development is a well-established field, but authentic community engagement is a practice with less easily understood strategies and outcomes. When Urban Homeworks first reached out for support, Nexus staff were not surprised to learn that the housing developer did not have a clearly articulated community engagement strategy. “They knew they could be doing something different and deeper with the community, but they did not yet have a framework to show them how,” said Nexus President and CEO Repa Mekha.

Urban Homeworks did have a long history of working in multiple low-wealth communities of color, primarily in St. Paul and Minneapolis. As a Christian organization, Urban Homeworks was committed to living out its values through innovative community development that produced dignified housing in some of the region’s most challenged neighborhoods. Over time, they had also developed some strategies for working with people in these neighborhoods.

One of the organization’s community projects, called Urban Neighbors, placed young professionals who volunteered 2-3 hours weekly in the community to live in Urban Homeworks’ mixed-income housing for a year-long service. At the time, around 95 percent of the Urban Neighbors placed in communities of color were white people coming from rural and suburban communities. When Urban Homeworks pitched the project for funding, Nexus staff saw a disconnect between the communities being served and the volunteers being recruited. Nexus challenged the Urban Homeworks leadership to think more intentionally about the racial makeup of the Urban Neighbors.

“We asked them, ‘What about the people who live there already?’” Mekha said. “They heard us right away and they

came back ready to talk more. There was a component of listening there that helped us see how a partnership could work.” Urban Homeworks’ commitment to learning and evolving convinced Nexus to commit to working with the housing developer.

Nexus staff began coaching Urban Homeworks on the principles of community engagement and how the practice could further the organization’s goals. Urban Homeworks Executive Director Chad Schwitters said that as Nexus staff described the principles of community engagement, a new world of possibilities opened up. Urban Homeworks staff believed in many of the principles of community engagement and were implementing some of the practices, but lacked a comprehensive understanding to work consistently from an engagement framework. “I had no idea people had thought about this stuff before,” said Schwitters. “It gave language to some of the ideas we had been struggling with.”

MAKING AN ORGANIZATIONAL COMMITMENT

Both organizations agreed that Urban Homeworks had to move beyond the concept of building affordable housing as an end goal and embrace a broader goal of building community. “The organization’s role should be to position the community to connect with issues around housing,” said Mekha. “What good is it to have a house if you’re scared to go outside? What good is a home if you’re isolated and you don’t know your neighbors? We believed that Urban Homeworks could be an innovator in linking community development with community engagement to draw connections between the physical environment and the people who lived there.”

For Nexus to deepen its partnership with Urban Homeworks, it was critical for Urban Homeworks’ leadership to commit to a community engagement approach. Schwitters and several Urban Homeworks board members were engaged in the early conversations that set in motion a cycle of organizational changes. As a starting point, Nexus provided a strategic planning grant to help Urban Homeworks develop its community engagement strategy and to support leadership in learning how this shift would transform the organization.

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Schwitters understood that this process would mean big changes for Urban Homeworks. “We had to figure out how to do this really well, especially as we were growing as an organization,” he said. “We needed to get closer to the ground as we got bigger.”

The strategic planning process elevated staff diversity as an early priority for change at Urban Homeworks. At the time, the staff did not represent the many races and ethnicities that lived in Urban Homeworks housing. Nexus organized an anti-racism training for Urban Homeworks and other organizations working on the Northside of Minneapolis, which led to significant organizational leadership changes at Urban Homeworks. The organization committed to diversifying the staff and board, and began by inviting members of the board (who were primarily white at the time) to step down to make room for people of color. After that, a more and more diverse set of people began coming into Urban Homeworks. While only 13 percent of staff and board were people of color in 2008, today people of color comprise around 45 percent of the organization’s staff.

Urban Homeworks also moved its offices to North Minneapolis as a demonstration of its commitment to the neighborhoods. “We were keenly aware that when we put our office right here on the Northside, we were making a statement about who we were,” said Director of Asset Management Russ Barclay. “We are not a real estate developer or a property manager. We are an organization for the people.”

Nexus also encouraged Urban Homeworks to shift its partnerships in order to build more trusting relationships with community-based organizations representing people of color. Urban Homeworks began to strategically strengthen its partnerships with other North Minneapolis-based organizations. The organization noticed a turning point in its partnerships when a tornado caused severe damage to historically African American North Minneapolis neighborhoods in 2011. Urban Homeworks stepped up to lead the cleanup efforts in partnership with other Northside groups, demonstrating strong trust and respect among the partners.



Urban Homeworks’ staff and families at a tubing event at Theodore Wirth Park

IMPORTANCE OF DEDICATED COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT STAFF

Once Urban Homeworks had completed its strategic plan and laid the foundation for successful community engagement work, Nexus provided financial support for Urban Homeworks to hire its first community engagement manager. Nexus staff helped write the job description to ensure that it described the right skill set. In particular, Nexus emphasized that the job description must communicate that the successful candidate would be responsible for integrating work throughout the organization rather than working in a silo.

When Shannon Jones came on staff, she found that some Urban Homeworks staff were still struggling with why community engagement was important when they were dealing with the daily challenges of financing affordable housing deals and managing a portfolio of properties spread throughout the Twin Cities. Nexus staff provided the encouragement and support that kept her going when times were hard. “When I started, I became the direct connection to the residents and I had to think strategically about some of the things we were doing,” Jones said. “Nexus was a great thinking partner and sounding board. It’s good to talk to people who understand the work.”

EVOLUTION OF THE COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT WORK

Each year, Nexus pushed Urban Homeworks to broaden its engagement strategies to reach new areas of the community and the organization. Having dedicated community engagement staff allowed Urban Homeworks to be available to residents and neighbors in a deeper way. Jones and other staff put formal structures in place to support community engagement. One of those was a residents' council that meets monthly to discuss issues common to all of the organization's housing sites, which they call People Oriented-Developments (PODs). POD leaders are encouraged to share their concerns and successes at these meetings, so they can learn from one another and build relationships. The POD Council also introduces leaders to the city's formal structures so they gain a better understanding of how to use their power to influence decisions. They invite city council members to discuss relevant issues and build relationships with the neighborhood organizations that hold power to influence local issues.

Urban Homeworks also began experimenting with culture changes in the PODs that encouraged residents to build stronger relationships among themselves and to connect with other neighbors. They provided residents with welcome baskets, for example, so they could reach out to new neighbors who moved into or nearby an Urban Homeworks property. The community engagement staff, which now includes a community engagement coordinator, organized regular events like winter snow tubing and summer barbeques so that POD residents and nearby neighbors could get to know one another. They also began providing incentives for people to organize their own activities, such as dedicated funding for National Night Out parties. All of these strategies focus on connecting people. "When you build relationships, you lift folks up," said Jones.

An indicator of the transformation of Urban Homeworks' community engagement strategy is the organization's commitment to working beyond its tenants and homeowners. Today, Urban Homeworks has more than 400 people on its

waiting list. Many of those people will never make it into Urban Homeworks housing, but staff have begun looking for ways to use the list to build community power and connect people to resources. They have asked people to write their local officials about the need for more affordable housing in their neighborhoods, and they are planning to roll out educational opportunities like a renters' class and empowerment training. Staff also have noticed an increase in the number of people who walk in off the street to access community resources. "When people have resources and knowledge and build networks with other people, they learn that they are not alone in the substandard housing they are experiencing," Jones said. "Whatever needs a solution, we make sure we know where the resources are."

Mekha said that the change he has seen in the Urban Neighbors program shows how far Urban Homeworks' community engagement strategy has come since the partnership began. Due in part to Nexus's ongoing coaching, staff recognized that the way the program was marketed to prospective participants, the recruitment partnerships Urban Homeworks had with other organizations, and the speakers lined up for monthly meetings were all biasing the pool of people who applied to the program. Conscious changes in each of these areas have paid off. Once overwhelmingly white, the Urban Neighbors are now around one-third people of color after just a year and a half of intentional effort to change the program's demographics.

Nexus has provided a series of five grants that have supported this transformation. Each year the needs have shifted, but the goal has remained steady: strengthen community engagement across all areas of the organization and facilitate the community's capacity to authentically reflect its values and vision.

LESSONS FOR FUNDERS OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

The Urban Homeworks story has clear lessons about how an organization can successfully integrate authentic community engagement strategies into its existing work. It also demonstrates the importance of funding community engagement, especially supporting emerging work that may take years to come to fruition. Schwitters gives credit to Nexus, as a funder and capacity-building partner, for supporting Urban Homeworks in developing its strategy. “Nexus helped us understand that we were building people’s capacity and we needed a stable place to do it. We needed to build a place to make [community engagement] happen,” he said. Some of the key lessons have been:

COMMITMENT TO A STRATEGY FOCUSED ON PEOPLE

When times got hard, particularly during the economic downturn, it was tempting for Urban Homeworks to abandon its community engagement strategy to focus on housing production. Nexus’s commitment to funding the community engagement work and providing the time and resources to make it successful helped Urban Homeworks see it through. “They reminded me not to give up on people in order to produce more housing units,” Schwitters said. “That solidarity, encouragement, connection and shared understanding helped me know I was not in it alone.”

SPACE TO LEARN

While some funders are focused solely on outcomes, Nexus is equally committed to supporting learning. Nexus met Urban Homeworks where the organization was at the time, and committed to working with them until they had a strong engagement strategy in place. Mekha holds Urban Homeworks up as an example of an organization that tests multiple strategies, listens, and learns from its successes, as well as from the strategies that haven’t worked.

Nexus also contributes to that learning. Urban Homeworks staff said that the best practices and resources Nexus provides bring new ideas to the work and share valuable lessons from other communities.

FUNDING LONG-TERM WORK AND OUTCOMES

Urban Homeworks has set the goal to build power with 1,000 neighbors over the next ten years. That kind of long-range plan requires funders who will stick with an organization over time and not expect a proposal for a new project every year. An organization committed to community engagement also needs funders who are willing to measure non-traditional outcomes. “A lot of funders are only going to fund housing production,” said Barclay. “Nexus wants to fund connections.”

A COMMITMENT BEYOND THE ORGANIZATION

Nexus believes in funding community engagement because the outcomes live on in people, regardless of what happens within the organization. “We don’t do community engagement because we want the community to help us be better,” Mekha said of Nexus’s commitment to broadening the use of the strategy. “We do it because we want the community to be the best version of itself.” The leadership Urban Homeworks has developed, even over a short time, will continue to benefit low-wealth communities of color for years. “If Urban Homeworks went away, what would be left?” Mekha asked. “Now you have folks who have experience as leaders. That lives and stays in the community.”

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As of September 1, 2015

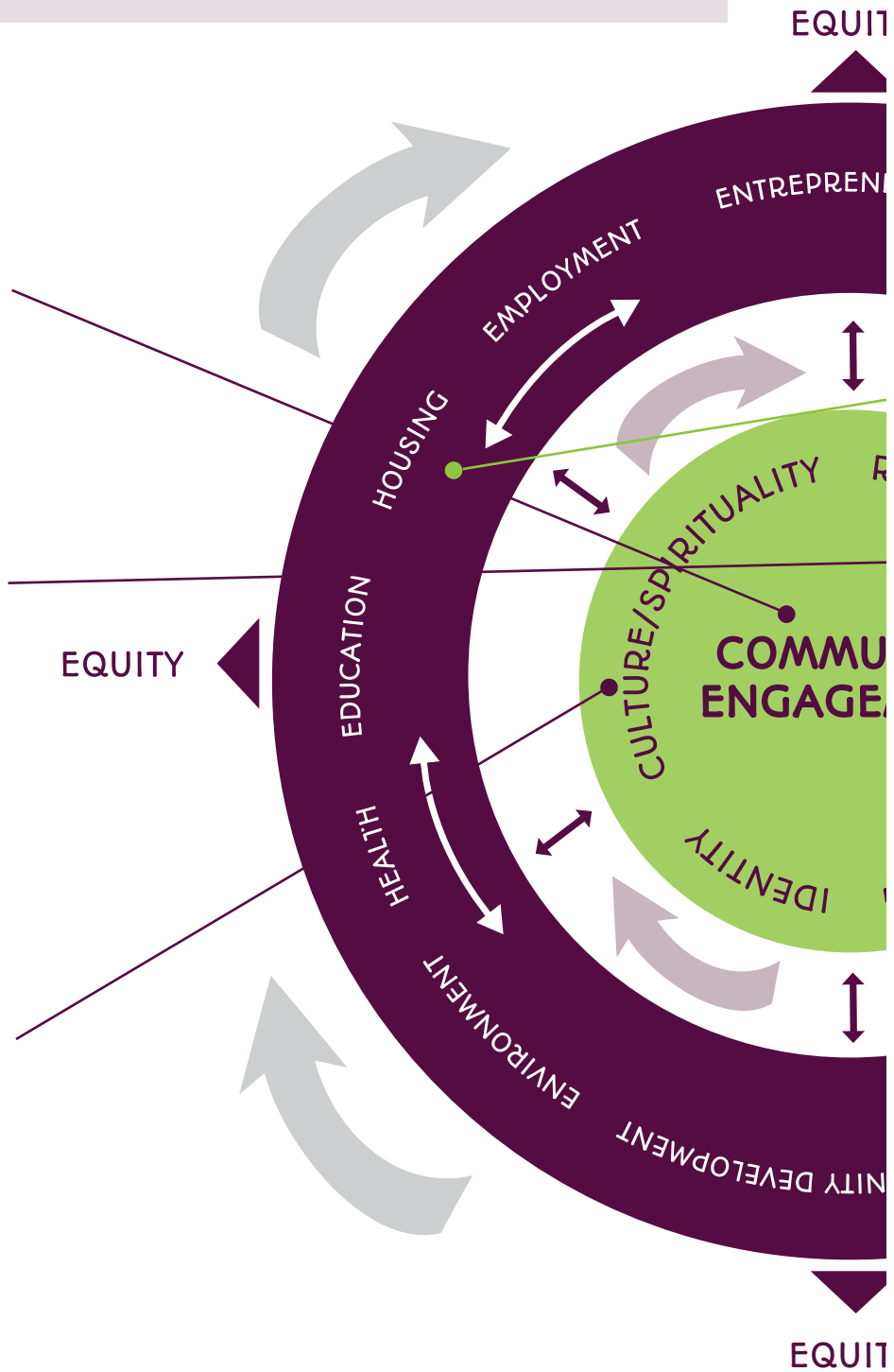
THE MODEL AT WORK: NEXUS COMMUNITY PARTNERS

This story is an example of how impacts build upon each other, as shown by the **Impacts of Community Engagement model** developed by the Building the Field of Community Engagement partners.

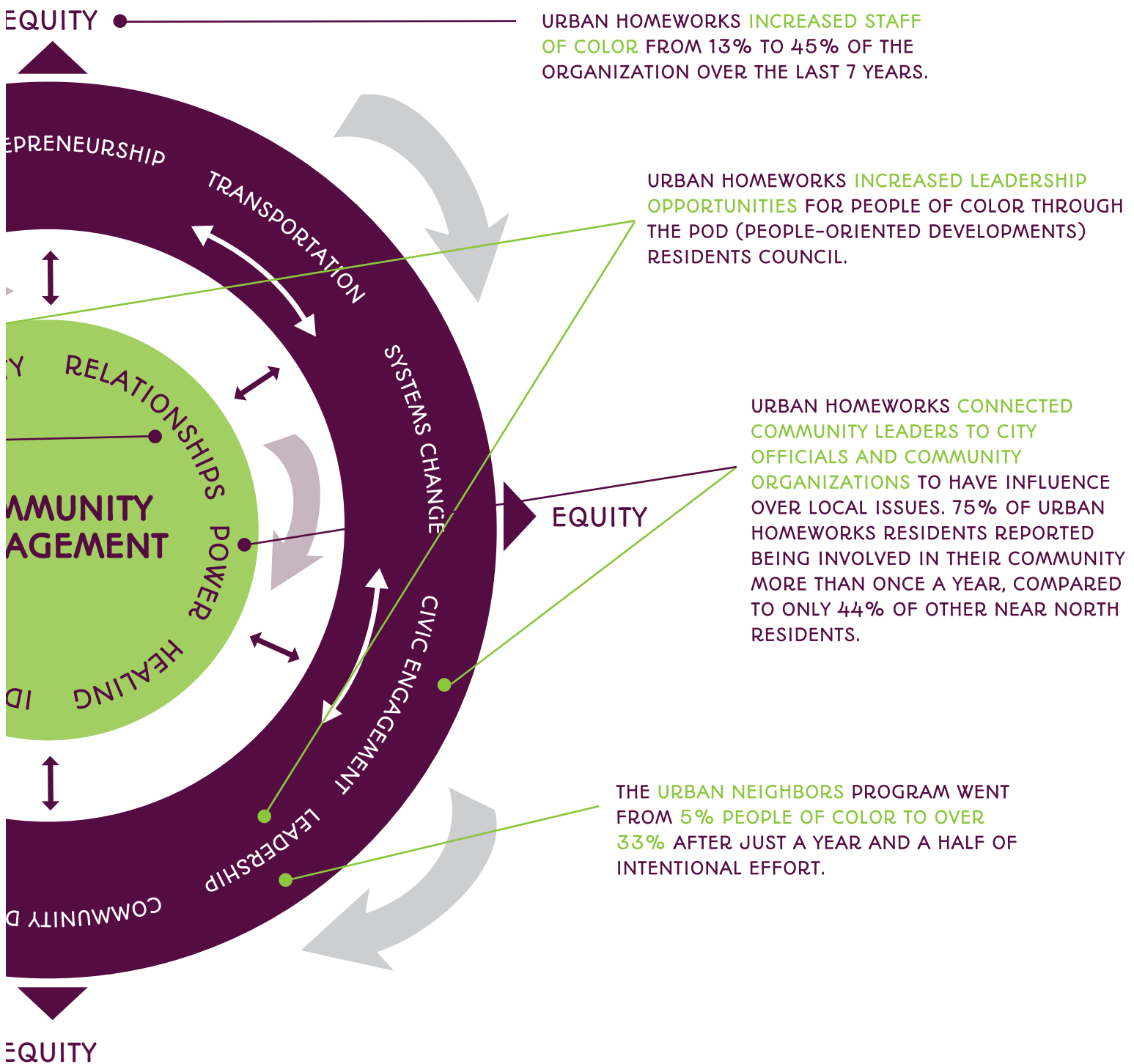
NEXUS SUPPORTED A COMPREHENSIVE **COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY** THAT INCLUDED ALL OF URBAN HOMEWORKS' STAFF AND BOARD, THE HIRING OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT STAFF, AND MORE OPPORTUNITIES FOR RESIDENTS OF COLOR TO SHAPE THEIR NEIGHBORHOOD.

URBAN HOMEWORKS ORGANIZED MULTIPLE WAYS FOR COMMUNITY RESIDENTS TO **CONNECT WITH EACH OTHER AND BUILD RELATIONSHIPS**. 83% OF URBAN HOMEWORKS RESIDENTS REPORTED THEIR NEIGHBORS COULD BE TRUSTED, COMPARED TO ONLY 59% OF NEAR NORTH RESIDENTS REPORTING THE SAME.

NEXUS SUPPORTED URBAN HOMEWORKS IN **STRENGTHENING THE SOCIAL, CULTURAL AND HUMAN CAPITAL** OF RESIDENTS TO ENGAGE MORE FULLY IN THEIR COMMUNITY.



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Organizations have only begun to tap the potential of community engagement for improving our communities.

ONGOING PARTNERSHIP

The series of grants, countless conversations and unwavering support Nexus has provided to Urban Homeworks has supported an organizational shift that has fundamentally changed the organization. Both organizations believe the partnership has yielded positive organizational changes, as well as clear benefits to the community. Urban Homeworks did the hard work of questioning every assumption that had guided its strategies for years, and then working to change those that were not building community power. Nexus provided the funding, technical assistance and mentorship that allowed Urban Homeworks to succeed and to fail. Both were equally valuable in creating an evolving understanding of what community engagement strategies would work for Urban Homeworks.

Many other nonprofits could produce more sustainable and equitable outcomes by using a community engagement approach. The partnership between Nexus and Urban Homeworks offers a great example of how organizations experienced in community engagement can share skills and ideas to support the growth of the practice. New practitioners will benefit from the mentorship and guidance of leaders who have deep experience with practicing engagement with their communities. “Nexus operates from the understanding that it isn’t just dollars or institutional ideas that will build flourishing communities; it is also the energy, vision and ideas of the people who live in them,” Mekha said. “Community engagement helps catalyze those resources for the benefit



Urban Homeworks’ residents Terence Cargill and his children, pictured on their block

of the community. Organizations, from foundations to government agencies to educational institutions to nonprofits, have only begun to tap the potential of community engagement for improving our communities.”