

NEXUS COMMUNITY PARTNERS



INNOVATION STORY
No 4

At the Center of Change

STORY BY
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Nexus Community Partners (Nexus) is a community engagement organization that strives to build more engaged and powerful communities of color by building a community development ecosystem with equity, inclusion, and community at its center.

“Communities can’t do what they aspire to do if systems are in the way.”

Repa Mekha
Nexus Community Partners



YEARS ACTIVE
Founded in 2004

GEOGRAPHY
Minnesota / Native nations

BUDGET
\$1M – \$4,999,999

LEADER
Repa Mekha

INNOVATION

NEXUS COMMUNITY PARTNERS

Nexus operates in the community development space with a community engagement mindset, creating partnerships that deliver more impact than any one entity could on its own.

Breakthrough

Through its efforts to transform the normally siloed community development approaches to workforce development and job creation, Nexus has earned its reputation as the “go-to organization” creating a means for people of color and low-wealth Minnesotans to exercise agency over their lives and their communities.



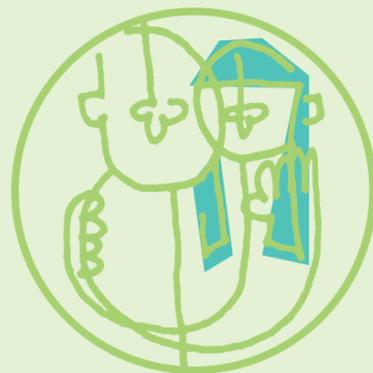
More than the money

Nexus doesn't provide direct grants to entrepreneurs. Instead it acts as a connector, bridging the gap between community members and potential funders — CDCs, private foundations, or governmental entities — that aren't always supportive of organizations led by immigrants and people of color.



An ear to the ground

Listening to community voices is central to Nexus' work, as is elevating what it hears to the broader philanthropic community. To maintain this pipeline of listening, Nexus seeks to hire staff members with a strong connection to the communities in which it works.



BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS



COMMITMENT TO COMMUNITY



SHARING OWNERSHIP

Nexus Community Partners sits on University Avenue, not too far from Payne Avenue in St. Paul and not too far from Lake Street in Minneapolis.

The lobby is bright and spacious, welcoming visitors with a large blackboard accented by handwritten text. Across the top is an excerpt from the organization's mission statement, reminding visitors that its work is about “building more engaged and powerful communities.”

“Relationships” appears on the board in ornate cursive, and “culture” appears in careful block text. The blackboard is elevated by inspirational quotes from noteworthy public intellectuals. A few lines from the Maya Angelou poem “On the Pulse of Morning” remind visitors that new opportunities are abundant. A quote from James Baldwin's 1962 essay “As Much Truth as One Can Bear” says, “Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced.”

Repa Mekha, the president and CEO of Nexus, is warm and wise. He and Theresa Gardella, Nexus' vice president of programs and operations, speak about the organization with the intimacy and familiarity of leaders with long tenures, people who didn't just inherit the mission but helped shape it. Both know the history of the organization well. Repa arrived in 2007, Theresa in 2008.

Nexus itself began in 2004 under a different name as part of a larger initiative that was launched in five cities around the country. Initially, the project focused on how to support the growing population of new immigrants who were revitalizing dormant neighborhoods. The goal was to partner with community and family foundations to support immigrant populations and bring new energy to neighborhoods. Early successes led to the formation of Payne-Lake Community Partners, a community-building effort focused on two specific business corridors: Lake Street in Minneapolis and Payne Avenue in St. Paul. Along those corridors, Payne-Lake Community Partners

Repa Mekha, the president and CEO of Nexus, is warm and wise.

The organization became a community-building intermediary focused on strengthening social, cultural and human capital in its service area.

advanced entrepreneurship, home ownership and financial literacy — programming Nexus still offers today.

In 2010, building on success along the Payne and East Lake corridors, Payne-Lake Community Partners expanded its services. After consultation with the communities it served, the organization became a community-building intermediary focused on strengthening social, cultural and human capital in its service area.

In order to rebrand successfully, the organization reached out to its community. Payne-Lake Community Partners no longer fit an organization that had expanded to include a new service area in North Minneapolis. It would have to change its name to match its expanded territory, but it also saw the change as an opportunity to consider how else it might engage with the community. Existing programs were in place and operating well, but new leadership wanted to validate the organization's value to the neighborhoods it served.

As a result, the rebranding effort represented more than expansion to a new service area and the search for a new name — it also allowed the organization to consider new possibilities at a pivotal time.

Those at the organization wanted a name that suggested a community engagement intermediary as opposed to a community development entity. To find a new name, they didn't just consult with branding experts; they talked with and listened to community elders. This approach of consulting their communities is representative of how the organization approaches all its work efforts. Consultation with community partners resulted in the name Nexus.

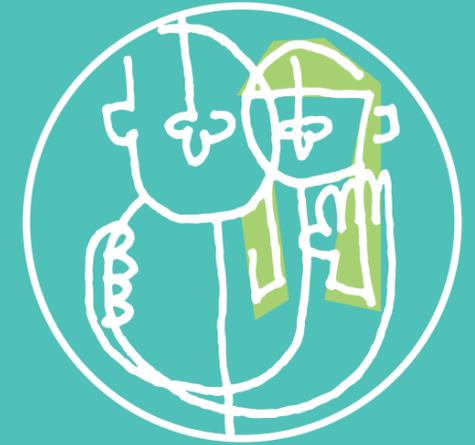


Repa Mekha



Minneapolis, Minnesota

CHARACTERISTIC
NO
1



BUILDING
RELATIONSHIPS

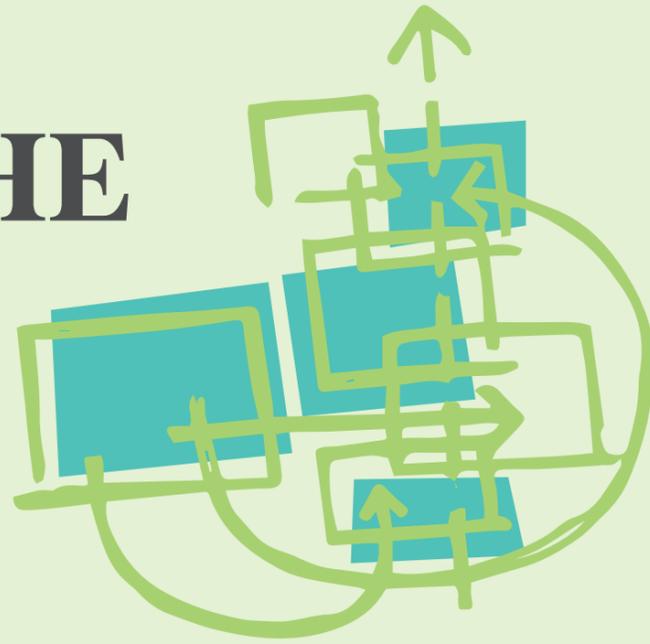
WHAT COULD YOU
SAY TO OTHER
LEADERS ABOUT
THE VALUE OF
RELATIONSHIPS AND
COLLABORATION?

"The work is bigger than any one of us and therefore requires many of us working together. No one can and no one should try doing it alone. And those that claim they can do so, should be considered with caution. We know that however far we've come as an organization, it's only been possible because of the relationships and the partnerships that we've been able to develop along the way. Relationships, authentic relationships, are the foundation of our work. And although we realize that Nexus is just a part of a larger ecosystem of community supports, we take on our role with a complete sense of responsibility."

Repa Mekha

Nexus Community Partners

MORE THAN THE MONEY



From its beginnings as a community partner, Nexus differed from traditional community development corporations (CDCs), nonprofit organizations that provide economic development services in specific geographic areas.

As the name implies, they usually support lower-income communities and focus on economic development, real estate development and educational programming. By contrast, Nexus started as a community engagement partner and forged a role focused less on financing and more on partnership with community members.

Nexus works with CDCs and provides those organizations the funding they need to do work in their own communities. However, Nexus didn't want to take on the work of a CDC because CDCs already exist to do that work. Nexus saw a need for something different and wanted to build a more inclusive ecosystem.

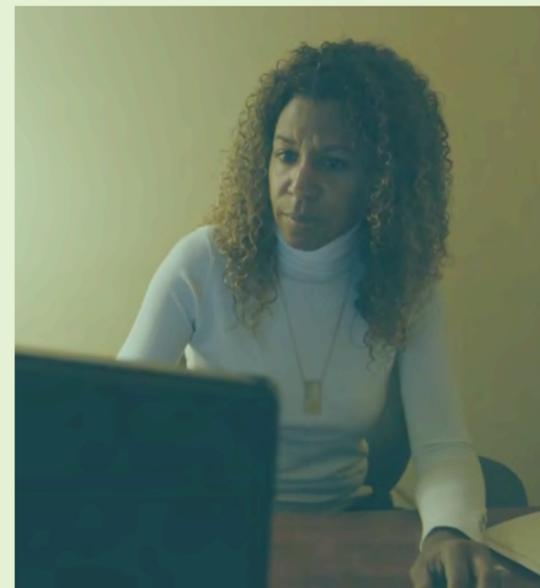
Community engagement is rooted in the belief that all community members, especially members of historically disadvantaged communities, should be engaged in and have authorship over



Hope Community Offices



Juxtaposition Arts



Karen Law



Appetite for Change

Access to a variety of conversations is critical to Nexus' success.

their lives and futures. It places equity, inclusion and community at the center of revitalization initiatives. In 2012, Nexus began a formal effort called Building the Field of Community Engagement that aimed to change the ways communities resolved issues and deployed resources. The success of Build the Field led to the creation of Nexus Community Engagement Institute (NCEI). NCEI brings experienced community engagement practitioners together to explore opportunities and address challenges in this new field. It also trains practitioners in institutions, systems and communities and produces resources to use community engagement to strengthen communities.

NCEI is among Nexus' many successes. It first focused on five culturally based organizations with different missions that all knew of one another, but had never collaborated. "They carried the weight as if they were only ones doing the work," Repa says. With Nexus' support, those organizations came together, found common ground in their stories, combined their collective wisdom and generated a whole new set of outcomes for community engagement. They built a model of community engagement driven through culture, and that had not happened before.

Since then, hundreds of people have attended NCEI's engaged learning series. Participating organizations have learned to articulate what their work looks

like. Foundations and other funding partners have come to appreciate how community engagement drives change in communities, and a more cooperative model has emerged. Now, rather than working in isolation, past NCEI participants collaborate to strengthen and reinforce one another's work. They even co-present at community engagement conferences.

Today, Nexus works with a broad range of partners ranging from prospective entrepreneurs to prominent national foundations. Access to a variety of conversations is critical to Nexus' success. The organization needs to know what goals community members have, individually and collectively. As Repa explains it, immigrants and people of color usually "don't start promising entrepreneurial ideas in isolation. [Promising ideas] happen in basements. They happen on back porches. They happen in small rooms where people are thinking about community value as opposed to individual entrepreneurship."

Nexus also needs to understand how funders work and how they determine which priorities and proposals to support. As Repa says, Nexus knows "communities can't do what they aspire to do if systems are in the way." The organization helps community members connect to funders, whether those funders are CDCs, private foundations or governmental entities.



Hmong American Farmers Association



Nexus Community Engagement Institute

CHARACTERISTIC
No
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COMMITMENT
TO COMMUNITY

HOW CAN AN
ORGANIZATION
MAKE ITS
COMMITMENT TO
COMMUNITY MORE
THAN JUST WORDS
ON PAPER?

"We know that if you pay attention to the community, build upon their strengths, and create opportunities for community-driven solutions, people's lives can be transformed and the systems that perpetuate inequities dismantled. Not only have we embraced community engagement as a key part of our work, community accountability has become core to our identity. It is our commitment to community that drives us to not only be as clear as possible about what we do, but how we do it. Because at the end of the day, the real 'outcome' is how people's lives are lived."

Theresa Gardella
Nexus Community Partners

“Yes, we give dollars, but we bridge, we buffer, we translate, we connect, we do all those things in order to ensure projects are successful.”

Repa Mekha
Nexus Community Partners

As Payne-Lake Community Partners evolved into Nexus, its leaders also asked the community for advice on what services it should prioritize. Instead of sitting in a boardroom drafting a strategic plan in isolation, they went out into the community and asked their community partners three questions: What value have we provided? What new value can we bring? And if the desired organization were in place, how would it look?

The community recommended that Nexus focus on three things. First, it should continue to do place-based work, focusing on specific communities where immigrants and people of color pursue entrepreneurial and community projects. Second, it should continue efforts to support organizations traditional philanthropy doesn't reach. Third, it should build services focused more on supporting communities than individuals within them.

The language the community framed around the work Nexus should do was community engagement, not community development. As a result, community engagement became an integral part of how Nexus thinks about entrepreneurial endeavors.

Today, Nexus works alongside CDCs and community entrepreneurs by bringing forward social and human capital and connections, often helping organizations succeed in settings that aren't always supportive of organizations led by immigrants and people of color. “Yes, we give dollars, but we bridge, we buffer, we translate, we connect, we do all those things in order to ensure projects are successful,” Repa says. “We have the capacity and relationships they need, the pathways and access.”

AN EAR TO THE GROUND

In its many years engaging in work supporting specific communities, Nexus has gained considerable expertise in navigating philanthropic spaces, partnering with community development councils, working with governmental agencies and supporting community members.

Nexus leverages this experience to help culturally based community organizations and individuals achieve entrepreneurial and financial success. But when Nexus Community Partners describes how it supports the communities it serves, one word comes up more than any other: listening. In this way, Nexus' considerable expertise arises from and is sustained by an unlikely foundation — humility. “We start with listening first,” Repa says. “That's integrated into everything we do because at the end of the day, when we implement, we want the community to see themselves in it.”

Shannon Smith Jones is the executive director of Hope Community Inc., a nonprofit that works to build community capacity in its Minneapolis neighborhood. Nexus has worked with Hope Community since the former opened its doors.



“We walk into a space thinking we want to learn.”

Shannon Smith Jones
Nexus Community Partners

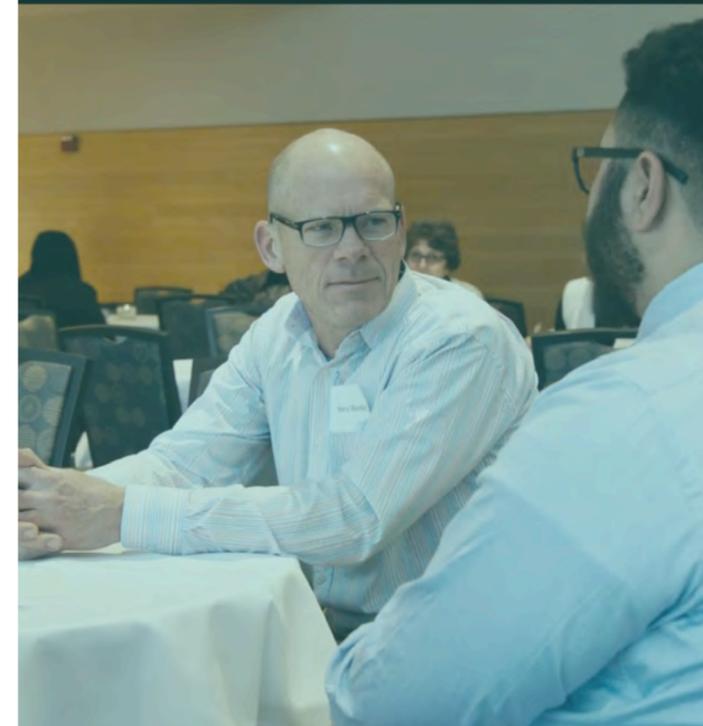
Shannon notes that Nexus earns the trust of community partners by “truly listening and being responsive to what people are saying. If what Nexus is hearing doesn’t align with what was planned, Nexus will pivot in order to meet the needs of the group or community they are working alongside.” Hope Community’s collaboration with Nexus has been beneficial to both organizations: Hope Community was active in Build the Field and helped shape the program. In turn, by participating in Build the Field, Hope Community not only spent time reflecting on its mission but also developed approaches to better articulate its work.

Speaking about listening as an intentional practice, Theresa says it “isn’t something we ever discussed ... It was a shift in 2007 to who we are today. Listening was part of an approach and set of values that [Repa] brought to the organization. It became part of who we hired. It is important that people who come to Nexus come with a core understanding that Nexus’ role is to support what community is telling us.”

That posture of listening is a “built-in value,” she says. It shapes how new hires

are brought on as staff members, how they’re introduced to the community and how Nexus engages with the community. “When we think about our staff, we understand we don’t know everything. We can’t know everything, and we never walk into a space thinking we do know. We walk into a space thinking we want to learn.” That posture, that humility, that willingness to listen and learn helps ensure Nexus has a seat at the table as ideas in the community germinate.

Nexus succeeds by earning the trust of its constituents, and one way it maintains that trust is by hiring staff members with ties to the communities and cultures it serves. When it expanded its service offerings, Nexus responded to requests from the community to add programming in North Minneapolis. It brought on a new staff member with a demonstrated commitment to North Minneapolis and encouraged them to spend six months in the community, just listening. Nexus called this orientation period “coffee time” and used it to consider how best to lend its resources to the area.



Community Building



Community Wealth Building

CHARACTERISTIC
No
3



SHARING
OWNERSHIP

WHY IS A SHARED OWNERSHIP MODEL SUCH AN EFFECTIVE APPROACH TO COMMUNITY WORK?

“Our work is always a collaborative effort with the community — learning, practicing, evaluating and producing new knowledge together. Nexus alone can’t comprehend all of the problems or imagine all the solutions. And we can’t predict the future. But together with community, we can master the possibilities. And community has served as our university of culture, wisdom and innovation. We’ve been blessed to have some of the best leaders, practitioners and healers build both practice and field with us. It’s only together that we can realize our vision for healthy, vibrant, abundant communities.”

Repa Mekha
Nexus Community Partners



St. Paul, Minnesota



Community Partnerships



Nexus Offices



Ideal staff members have a relationship to the communities they serve. They have history and past work experience and knowledge of the neighborhood. It's important that all team members are comfortable and familiar with "the places and spaces and people we work with every day," Theresa says. Nexus doesn't want team members making assumptions about how they can be helpful. "We recognize there's a difference between us and most of the people we serve. We have resources that we walk into and out of meetings with."

Listening and humility allow great access to community members. Years of experience allow access to funders and governmental agencies and other decision-makers. The space where experience and access come together is Nexus. "Because we have access to [both] tables and conversations, we can help create access and bring resources to bear," Repa says. He adds that, just as philanthropic partners and government entities trust Nexus, "community trusts us to be an honest broker. When we say 'community engagement,' we really are saying it with the spirit of a collective voice."

As it looks to the future, consistent with its focus on building relationships, Nexus is prioritizing three ingredients it believes might shift the landscape: authorship, leadership and ownership. The goal is to have community leaders and entrepreneurs working collaboratively with community partners and funding partners to write plans and proposals, lead efforts to bring those ideas to market and own projects from design through implementation and beyond. The desired outcome is not community members working in isolation; it's sustainable change at the community level through integrating authorship, leadership and ownership into existing funding and development frameworks.

Repa explains, "We're not walking into any opportunity one-dimensionally. We're asking, 'Where are opportunities for community-based organizations and leaders to represent themselves at decision-making tables?'"



Investment in Cultural Capital



Informed and Guided by Community



Minneapolis, Minnesota