

Ambassador Program Puts Twist on Community Reinvestment

By [Brian Patrick Eha](#)

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Despite being eager to invest in their communities, most banks would consider it a bridge too far to loan out one of their star employees for an entire year.

Not so Bank of the West. As part of a new community ambassador program, the San Francisco bank has embedded one of its client services personnel with JVS San Francisco, a nonprofit that provides educational programs and job training to the unemployed.

Bank of the West has been a partner of JVS — formerly Jewish Vocational Services — since 2003, with its employees volunteering to hold mock interviews and resume reviews for participants of the nonprofit's job-placement programs. The bank has also contributed nearly \$250,000 to JVS over the past decade.

But the ambassador program, for which the bank receives Community Reinvestment Act credit, signals a new level of commitment both to JVS and to the Bay Area — a commitment the bank hopes will pay dividends in the form of leadership training for its people and a greater understanding of the needs of nonprofits, which can be an important customer segment for banks.

"We are building our leadership position in the community," said Jenny Flores, the head of community affairs at the \$76 billion-asset bank. "We are developing a talent-management program that helps us retain top-performing individuals. We're learning a tremendous deal from this opportunity, and it's helping us to refine other partnerships we have across the 19 states that we serve."

Daniel Tondeau, an assistant vice president at the bank, began his one-year stint at JVS in November. During his tenure, Tondeau, a 15-year veteran of Bank of the West, is focusing his efforts on BankWork\$, a free eight-week program that gives job seekers the skills they need to obtain entry-level positions at financial institutions, with an eye toward preparing them for long careers in banking. The target wage for graduates, according to Flores, is \$26 an hour.

BankWork\$ began at JVS Los Angeles in 2006 and has since spread to Portland, Seattle and San Francisco. In all, close to 1,500 people have graduated from BankWork\$, of whom some 75%



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immediately found jobs in financial services, according to a news release. The San Francisco program, which kicked off in August 2015, has graduated three eight-week classes since August, and expects to start another in June, eventually working up to half a dozen classes a year across the Bay Area.

They should find no shortage of applicants. While San Francisco is generally seen as an affluent city, not everyone living there is "a wealthy techie," said Abby Snay, JVS's executive director. "We may have one of the lowest unemployment rates in the country, but we have among the highest and fastest-growing levels of inequality. There are over a million people in the Bay Area who are living below the self-sufficiency wage."

Tondeau is working to change that. Though announced in May, Bank of the West's community ambassador program has actually been running for about six months. Having a Bank of the West employee at JVS as the nonprofit builds up its BankWork\$ program "has just been a tremendous bonus and asset for us," Snay said.

The ambassador program is also galvanizing other Bank of the West employees to get involved, Flores said. An additional 50 to 60 staffers have signed up to review trainees' resumes, help them hone their interviewing skills and give them tours of Bank of the West branches. The bank's social media team even volunteered to teach participants how to enhance their LinkedIn profiles.

What's more, Bank of the West — a subsidiary of BancWest Corp., itself wholly owned by BNP Paribas — has hired six BankWork\$ trainees over the last six months.

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The bank also hopes to benefit by using the ambassador program as a form of leadership training, retaining values-oriented employees and grooming top performers for executive roles. Once Tondeau's time is up, the bank's leadership will choose a new ambassador and a new nonprofit with which to continue the program, though the focus will remain on community development.

"For the working-class community, the ability to stay in San Francisco is very, very difficult," Flores said. "It's really important to have programs like JVS's that are helping people to build careers that help them develop a sustainable wage to live in the Bay Area. That is so critical."