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March 2020 Spotlight on SRCD U.S. State Policy Fellow: Sarah Prendergast, Ph.D.

Sarah Prendergast, Ph.D., is a SRCD State Policy Post-doctoral Fellow who is placed in the Colorado Department of Human Services, Office of Early Childhood.

AUTHOR

Sarah Prendergast, Ph.D.

I earned my doctoral degree in Applied Developmental Science with the goal of conducting developmental research that was relevant to early childhood policies. However, throughout my training I realized that I wasn't always sure what that meant in practice. I applied for the SRCD State Policy Fellowship to better understand how research is conducted or applied within government agencies. Though I am only halfway through the fellowship, I have gained a foundational understanding of how research can support program development, assess effectiveness, determine priorities, and much more.

I am currently placed in the Colorado Department of Human Services, Office of Early Childhood (OEC). The OEC includes two divisions: the Division of Early Care and Learning (DECL) and the Division of Community and Family Support (DCFS). My fellowship primarily focuses on work being conducted within DCFS. DCFS houses the Head Start Collaboration Office and is responsible for the administration of several community

and family support programs and funding streams, which span topic areas of early intervention, early childhood mental health consultation, and family strengthening programs including home visitation.

Throughout my fellowship experience thus far, I have been involved in supporting a randomized-controlled trial of the Colorado Community Response (CCR) program. CCR is an innovative practice to promote economic security and prevent child neglect among low-income families who have been referred to child welfare, but who are not required to engage in services. I initially joined CCR to contribute my research skills to enhance the referral process, but since then I have also been involved in supporting implementation as well. My involvement in CCR has allowed me to have first-hand experience with administrative data systems, and to better understand the strengths and challenges that agencies encounter when making use of data to improve the lives of children and families. In terms of implementation, I have worked with administrators of the program to better understand which aspects of CCR are important to implementation fidelity and built a data dashboard to assist administrators with improving implementation outcomes.

I am also involved in the Colorado Partnership for Thriving Families (CPTF) – a statewide effort to bring together state and county departments of public health and human services, and the health care system to support family well-being and prevent infant maltreatment. Some of my fellowship activities have included a review of measures and indicators important for the prevention of child maltreatment that are collected in Colorado and are publicly available. This review will assist communities in developing their Child Maltreatment Prevention Framework for Action community plans which are overseen by the OEC, and support CPTF strategic planning. My participation in the CPTF has provided me with the opportunity to learn how partnerships and stakeholder processes are critical for creating systems change.

One area of policy research that I was especially excited to learn about was the ways in which research informs the legislative process. The expansion and formalization of the Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation (ECMHC) program is currently being considered by the state legislature, and I have been fortunate to observe the legislative process through this bill and others introduced thus far. I contributed my research analysis skills to the OEC to better understand the current ECMHC program and inform model development going forward.

My experiences thus far have not only shaped my understanding of the ways in which developmental research can be useful to government agencies but have provided me with critical skills for bridging research and policy. I am eternally grateful for this fellowship experience with SRCD and the OEC.

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