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June 2020 Spotlight on SRCD U.S. Federal Policy Fellow: Parisa Parsafar, Ph.D.

Parisa Parsafar is a SRCD Federal Congressional Policy Fellow who is placed in the Office of U.S. Senator Christopher Coons.

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As a developmental psychology doctoral student, my work focused on understanding the building blocks that support children's healthy socioemotional development. The question of how children's experiences and management of emotions relate to the way they learn, think about their past situations, and regulate their behavior drove much of my research agenda. I recognized that the results of my basic developmental science work carried broad implications for understanding individual differences in children's later health and education outcomes, yet I struggled with how I could best leverage these discoveries and use them to meaningfully impact programming that can improve children's developmental trajectories. The SRCD Congressional Policy Fellowship offered me the ideal training and setting to learn how developmental science is used by policymakers and translated into legislation -- for the broadest, sweeping impacts on children's lives.

I am currently a Congressional Fellow in the Office of U.S. Senator Christopher Coons (D-DE), where I work on Health and Education Policy. Although this portfolio covers a broad range of legislation (from Medicare to foster care), I primarily focus on policy that affects maternal and child health, early childhood and K-12 education, and legislation that captures their intersection (e.g., childcare, nutrition, socioemotional programming, the social determinants of health, and telehealth expansion). Since Senator Coons is on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, this past year I have also had the privilege of supporting the office's global health portfolio, where I have avidly worked together with international stakeholder organizations to advance legislation that promotes early childhood development programming in nations with limited resources to support such programs.

My day-to-day work highlights how practitioners, researchers, community organizers, advocates, parents, federal agencies, and policymakers jointly shape the policy making process. I take meetings regularly with stakeholders (e.g., advocacy groups, philanthropic organizations, policy and research institutes, and individual constituents), which are key to spreading awareness of where federal intervention is needed or lacking. The outreach and advocacy of these groups is paramount to mobilizing congressional offices to support impactful policy. I regularly connect with academics and developmental researchers whose scientific outcomes provide foundational support for evidence-based policy ideas that can benefit families. Through these interactions, I have seen how developmental science findings can be effectively translated into suggestions for legislative policy solutions or used as an impetus for drawing attention to an area where legislative attention is needed. I engage regularly with stakeholder groups for their assistance and advice in advocating for pieces of legislation the Senator has decided to support or lead that promote healthy outcomes for women and children. In connecting with experts from the different federal agencies for their advice and feedback on how to improve legislative ideas, I have developed knowledge of how the different branches of government interface with and support each other. I have learned that coalition building and cross-sector collaborations are necessary to garner support for and help move child and family policy forward. In short, through interfacing with these diverse societal sectors, I have observed first-hand, the way different interconnected systems interface and together impact developmental trajectories, reflecting Bronfenbrenner's systems theory.

My work regularly involves reviewing proposed legislation and drawing from the analytic skills I developed during graduate school to distill and translate their content and provide advice to the Senator on whether or not he should support them. What I am most grateful for is the opportunity to lead various legislative products. These include letters to federal agency heads requesting stronger action and guidance to support

the child care industry, building support through multi-congressional member letters to appropriators requesting increased funding for programs that support maternal and child health and nutrition, and developing legislation that addresses health disparities by supporting family-based nutrition and physical education programming for members of underserved communities.

Importantly, throughout this experience thus far, I have witnessed the passion and dedication of so many individuals from diverse settings and sectors, political and religious backgrounds, who care deeply about supporting evidence-based policy solutions that can improve outcomes for the tiniest and most vulnerable members of society. This incredible fellowship experience has solidified my commitment to a career that will help me inform, support, and advance policy that is rooted in developmental science and can have the greatest benefit for children and families. I am forever grateful for the fellowship opportunity and the experiences and training I have received thus far.

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