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July 2020 Spotlight on SRCD U.S. Federal Policy Fellow: Krystal Bichay-Awadalla, Ph.D.

Krystal Bichay-Awadalla is a SRCD Federal Executive Branch Policy Fellow who is placed in the Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation (OPRE), Administration for Children and Families (ACF), U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS)

Krystal Bichay-Awadalla, Ph.D.

AUTHOR

I first heard about the SRCD U.S. Policy Fellowship Program and the Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation (OPRE) when I received a Child Care Research Scholars grant, which is a grant funded by OPRE to support dissertation research on child care policies. During one of the grantee meetings, I had the opportunity to hear from the directors of the Office of Child Care and the Office of Head Start, which are both within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Administration for Children and Families (ACF), and learn about their offices' research priorities. I realized the importance of conducting research, such as my dissertation, that informs policy, and that could potentially have an impact on policies meant to support children and families nationally. I wanted to continue my contribution to bridging the gap between research and policy and the fellowship was the perfect opportunity to do so.

As luck would have it, I was offered an SRCD Federal Executive Branch Policy Fellowship! I am in my first year of the fellowship with a placement in OPRE, which is also situated in ACF. I work within OPRE's Division of Child and Family Development (DCFD), which is responsible for conducting research and evaluation projects for three ACF program offices: the Office of Head Start, the Office of Child Care, and the Children's Bureau. The common goal of these offices is to support underserved children and families by improving their social and economic wellbeing, which is right in line with what I wanted to do with my career following graduate school.

Three words come to mind when I think of my fellowship experience: Communication, Dissemination, and Collaboration.

One of the most important principles that I have learned from my fellowship experience so far is communication. I have been fortunate enough to participate in the development of learning agendas with our partner program offices to determine which research projects are of highest priority and most policy relevant. Through these meetings with both the Office of Child Care and the Office of Head Start, I have been able to hear from the same directors that I heard from as a Research Scholar as they work with OPRE to communicate their highest priority questions that will inform their policy decisions. Based on these extensive conversations, which start about a year in advance, the program offices' research projects of interest are identified and implemented by OPRE. Understanding how this decision-making process unfolds made me realize how the work that we are doing in OPRE is directly relevant and responsive to our program partners' needs, which further solidified the importance of communication when addressing the policies that support the nation's most underserved populations.

Another valuable principle that I learned from my fellowship experience is the importance of dissemination. One of OPRE's core priorities is the dissemination of resources to practitioners, policymakers, and researchers in the early care and education (ECE) field, as well as to the program offices that we work with. Working in OPRE highlighted the importance of not just disseminating information, but also understanding whether the intended audiences are receiving the information and gauging the usefulness of the information for these audiences. I have also been exposed to various effective dissemination channels, such as webinars and social media platforms that allow individuals to easily access the information. Additionally, OPRE emphasizes the importance of disseminating and interpreting the findings from our research projects with the program offices that we work with to understand our research in context. This experience helped me recognize that dissemination is particularly important as it helps to bridge the gap between research and

policy by sharing resources with relevant audiences with the purpose of improving the programs and policies that support children and families.

Finally, the fellowship experience has emphasized, for me, the importance of collaboration. For most of us, this year has been a year of challenges and adaptation due to the coronavirus pandemic. Although this has been an extremely trying time for most, it has provided me with a very interesting fellowship experience. As soon as the coronavirus pandemic spread, our colleagues across OPRE and our partner program offices immediately shifted efforts to support the children and families that we work with as they struggled with changes related to the pandemic. We modified the scope of our research projects to find ways to disseminate resources for the pandemic response and to understand how the pandemic was affecting the children, families, teachers, and programs that we serve. The immediate action that was taken made me proud to be a part of an organization like OPRE, where the response was not one of selfishness, but one in which our office came together and prioritized the needs of the populations that we care about most. This experience, in particular, taught me the importance of collaboration when supporting others.

Overall, I am extremely grateful to SRCD and OPRE for this one-of-a-kind experience. I have really enjoyed my fellowship and learned so much about the importance of research as it informs policy, as well as what it takes to bridge the gap between research and policy through communication, dissemination, and collaboration. I am proud to be a part of a team that works every day to bridge that gap to support some of the most vulnerable populations in the nation.

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