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February 2021 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)

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This past September, I began my second and final year of the SRCD Federal Executive Branch Policy Fellowship in the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE), which is situated within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Administration for Children and Families (ACF). OPRE is responsible for conducting rigorous research and evaluation projects that study ACF programs and the populations they serve. I am placed in the Division of Child and Family Development (DCFD), where I work on research and evaluation projects that focus on two main areas, child care and Head Start/Early Head Start.

Working in DCFD has given me the opportunity to observe firsthand the interplay of research and policy in the federal government. As I am in my second year of the fellowship, I have been able to see a full cycle of how research informs policy and vice versa during the fiscal year. The cycle begins with discussions with our

partner program offices, including the Office of Head Start and the Office of Child Care, to determine the highest priority research questions that will inform their policy decisions. Based on those discussions, we develop requests for proposals to answer those research questions, review the submitted proposals, award the new contracts, and begin the project activities.

As a result of conversations we had with our partner program offices this past year, two priority projects emerged. I was able to participate in writing the request for proposals and supporting the review of the proposals that were submitted for these projects. Additionally, contracts were awarded in September 2020 and I have been able to take more of a leadership role as the work has progressed. The first project is called Building and Sustaining the Early Care and Education (ECE) Workforce (BASE). This project aims to understand what drives ECE workforce turnover and identify and evaluate promising strategies that are meant to promote workforce recruitment and retention in the ECE field. I have really enjoyed working on this project because the topic is imperative to study as ECE workforce turnover is very high. There is a need to understand why ECE providers are leaving at such a high rate and what we can do to encourage the providers to stay, in order to retain a qualified ECE workforce. The second project that I am working on is called Examining the Conversion of Enrollment Slots from Head Start to Early Head Start. The purpose of this project is to understand how and why Head Start grantees decide to convert their available Head Start slots to Early Head Start slots and identify the facilitators and barriers to both the conversion process and the provision of high-quality infant-toddler services following conversion. This project has also been very exciting to be a part of because it directly addresses the need for more high-quality infant-toddler care, particularly for low-income populations.

Having the opportunity to take on a leadership role on these projects has taught me many significant lessons about conducting policy relevant research. First, it emphasized the importance of conducting research that has clear policy implications. The topics chosen for the two OPRE projects are priority topics in the ECE field because they address the need for a more stable ECE workforce and more access to high-quality infant-toddler care, and the findings will help improve programs and policies in place that support these initiatives. Second, working on these projects has taught me how critical it is to collaborate with our partner program offices throughout all of the research activities, including developing the research design, data collection, and dissemination, to ensure that we are effectively answering their policy relevant research questions. Additionally, it emphasized how important collaboration with our partner program offices is during the interpretation of the results so the findings are understood in context, as they have a more intimate knowledge of the programs and policies that we are examining, and so that they can use the results to

inform policy and program decisions. These collaborations have helped me understand that the relationship between research and policy is bidirectional; our research is informed by the policy needs of our partner program offices and the findings from the research activities are shared with our partner program offices so that they can be used to inform policy and program improvement.

Finally, the experience I have gained supporting these projects has taught me the importance of discussing dissemination early on in any project, before the research activities start. This is imperative so that throughout the project, we can be thoughtful about what information we want to disseminate to various audiences and what products would be most useful for those audiences. Having this intentional focus early on is vital because a common understanding about the information that will be disseminated can guide project activities and deliverables so that they are most impactful.

I am extremely grateful to SRCD and OPRE for the incredible learning opportunity to experience firsthand what the intersection of research and policy looks like in the federal government. I have learned so much from this experience, including the significance of answering research questions that are relevant to policy, involving stakeholders throughout the research process, and the importance of disseminating knowledge that can be used to inform policy and program decisions. As a result, I will be able to use the valuable skills and knowledge that I gained from my fellowship experience and apply these skills in the future as I continue on my career path, which will make me a better researcher.

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