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March 2021 Spotlight on SRCD U.S. Federal Policy Fellow: Ellen Litkowski, Ph.D.

Ellen Litkowski 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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Rigor, relevance, transparency, independence, and ethics.

These are the five principles of the Administration for Children and Families' evaluation policy. This policy serves as a guide through which the Administration for Children and Families (ACF), which sits within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), conducts research and evaluation to inform policy and practice. As a second year SRCD Executive Branch Policy Fellow serving in the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE), which sits within ACF, I have become quite familiar with the principles of the evaluation policy. OPRE carries out the majority of its work through grants and contracts and embeds the five evaluation principles within our projects. Although each principle outlines important considerations, my work in the past year (in tandem with the tumultuous time our country is facing) has made me think

extensively about how the Federal government conducts *relevant* and *ethical* work. In particular, my time as a Fellow has raised several key questions for me.

Whose voices are heard in the federal research and evaluation space?
How do we foster and sustain new relationships through our work?
How do we build capacity in order to support diverse perspectives?

Across its four divisions, OPRE conducts research and evaluation work focused on ACF programs and the populations they serve. The underlying motivation for all of OPRE's work, whether it be a descriptive study or a full-scale evaluation of a program, is to improve the lives of children and families. As a member of the Division of Child and Family Development (DCFD), my work centers primarily on issues related to child care and early education (CCEE) and involves working closely with stakeholders from both the Office of Child Care and the Office of Head Start. Although each of these program offices has existing relationships with CCEE leaders across the nation, forming new relationships is critical for hearing and incorporating new perspectives and advancing research forward for *all* people.

One of the primary projects I am supporting this year is the Child Care and Early Education Policy Research Analysis (CCEEPRA) project. CCEEPRA is a uniquely designed contract that facilitates rapid responses to the research and policy needs of our program offices through supporting expert convenings around priority topics and conducting rigorous analyses of policies, practices, and research. As I have learned through my time at OPRE, many of our contracts support the engagement of key experts and stakeholders at critical junctures in the project to ensure that the research is relevant and reflects the needs of the field. Through the CCEEPRA project, I have been fortunate to be involved in discussions around the invitation of these experts and stakeholders. This year, we have been particularly intentional about seeking out involvement from experts who may not previously have been engaged in CCEEPRA or other OPRE projects. Bringing in these voices betters our work by infusing new ideas, but also by enhancing capacity in the field to conduct policy-relevant research. Another new component of CCEEPRA aims to produce effective dissemination products that meet the key research needs of CCEE leaders. To ensure that these products cover relevant topics and do so in an accessible format, we plan to engage with stakeholders from different states and territories. As we invite states and territories, we have considered representation across localities with different socioeconomic and demographic characteristics, research capacities, and past receipt of federal funding. In doing so, we hope to establish new relationships and foster conversations about how to make policy-relevant research both more responsive to and useful for a diverse range of individuals.

My understanding of relevant and ethical research has also been bolstered by my involvement on OPRE's Methods Team. The Methods Team includes individuals from the different divisions of OPRE and aims to support our staff's knowledge of innovative methods that we can apply in our daily work. One of the team's key tasks is to coordinate an annual Methods Meeting for federal staff who work in research and evaluation offices, contractors from research firms, and academic researchers. This year, our meeting topic focuses on how to have effective engagement with communities in social services research and evaluation. Although we are still in the planning phases, we have been conducting interviews with experts in community-engaged research and have been thinking critically about how we can meaningfully involve communities in the entire research process, from the development of the research questions through the dissemination of the findings. Such authentic engagement supports the relevance of our research and elevates new voices and expertise in the federal space. Moreover, our expert interviews have prompted us to consider what community involvement and true partnerships look like after a project ends, such as when a government contract ends. Understanding how a desire to conduct relevant research informed by communities can operate within the bounds of federally funded research has been an incredibly important learning experience for me.

I am so grateful to SRCD for this opportunity to gain experience and insight on how to conduct research that informs policy and to OPRE for displaying an incredible commitment to conducting relevant and ethical research and wholeheartedly endorsing new federal calls for equity. My colleagues at OPRE infuse all that they do with incredible amounts of time, passion, and dedication, and I know that the skills and lessons I have learned from them will be invaluable throughout my future career.

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