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May 2021 Spotlight on SRCD U.S. Federal Policy Fellow: Parisa Parsafar, Ph.D.

Parisa Parsafar is a SRCD Federal Executive Branch Policy Fellow who is placed in the Child Development and Behavior Branch at the *Eunice Kennedy Shriver* National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, National Institutes of Health

Parisa Parsafar, Ph.D.

AUTHOR

As a first year Executive Branch Policy Fellow at the National Institutes of Health (NIH), I have been exposed to the dynamic aspects of the nation's leading medical research agency and been a part of the process that shapes the agency's research agenda. My fellowship placement is in the *Eunice Kennedy Shriver* National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD), one of the 27 Institutes and Centers of the NIH. While some of the other institutes focus on specific illnesses or disease categories (e.g., the National Cancer Institute, National Institute of Drug Abuse), NICHD's mission is to lead research and training to understand human development, improve reproductive health, enhance the lives of children and adolescents, and optimize abilities for all.

More specifically, I am placed in the Child Development and Behavior Branch at NICHD, where I am being trained as a program officer and I assist in maintaining a portfolio that includes research on social and emotional development in children and adolescents, child and family processes, human-animal interaction, and childhood obesity. Program administration allows me to leverage my training in developmental psychology and background in developmental emotion science and emotion-cognition connections while acquiring the scientific stewardship skills necessary to oversee cutting edge research programs in my area of expertise. This positioning ensures that I stay up-to-date on the latest findings and methodologies in my research area and has allowed me to draw from my subject matter expertise while engaging with researchers (both applicants and grantees) and identifying research gaps. I have also learned how a variety of program officer functions internal to the institute (e.g., convening workshops) can be used to stimulate scientists to consider new research directions to address gaps in research as well as bring awareness to topics in need of greater investigation, such as through co-drafting new funding opportunity announcements.

As a former SRCD Federal Congressional Policy Fellow I have extensive experience in addressing health disparities through policy. At NICHD I have been fortunate to be able to use this public health knowledge to foster research that can be used to inform better child and family health policy. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed pre-existing inequities in public health and forced an internal assessment of the way that the research enterprise contributes to and mitigates health disparities. As a proactive step to addressing these disparities and improving equity, diversity, and inclusion among NICHD's internal and external workforces and scientific endeavors, the **ST**rategies to En**R**ich **I**nclusion and Achie**V**e **E**quity (STRIVE) initiative was launched. Since the start of my fellowship at NICHD, I have been privileged to be involved in STRIVE and play a substantive role in helping to co-lead the committee that focuses on understanding how the research that NICHD funds can mitigate the underlying causes of health disparities. I am excited to extend my fellowship at NICHD for a second year, during which I will be working on a transdisciplinary committee to develop an action plan which will inform the ongoing implementation of NICHD's strategic plan by highlighting research ventures that the Institute can support to mitigate disparities in maternal and child health.

This past year has also presented me with the opportunity to build upon my understanding of the policy process through an informal detail with NICHD's Office of Legislation and Public Policy, where I work with a team to develop and prepare materials that support the Institute's interactions with and responses to Congress. Importantly, in this role I have been able to bridge the gap in my understanding of how legislation and congressional directives impact the child development research infrastructure and agenda. I am fortunate to learn and experience first-hand how legislation is implemented and executed from the

executive branch agency perspective.

The SRCD Policy Fellowship and NICHD have afforded me a wide breadth of unique experiences and have broadened my understanding of developmental science and policy connections beyond what any individual position could provide. This year I have been involved in activities as diverse as managing part of a research portfolio, to working to inform the implementation of the Institute's strategic plan and bolstering the future of NICHD's health disparities research, to supporting the agency's legislative and policy functions. Together, these experiences have widened the scope of my exposure to the policymaking process. In the next year of my fellowship, I am looking forward to leveraging the full extent of my experience from both of my SRCD policy fellowships and my different roles at NICHD while carrying out my current projects and enhancing the role research plays in the health of children and families.

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