NEWS | POSTED OCTOBER 15, 2021

SRCD Federal Policy Fellow Professional Portfolio Abstracts: Parisa Parsafar, Ph.D.

2020-2021 SRCD Federal Executive Branch Policy Fellow at the *Eunice Kennedy Shriver* National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) in the National Institutes of Health (NIH).

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Introduction: The portfolio samples the breadth of activities I have been substantively involved in over this past year, which spans program administration work (NOSI on COVID-19 related school disruptions), a five-part workshop series for an institute specific initiative focused on internal health disparities research policy changes (NICHD STRIVE), providing subject matter expertise as a project scientist on a Trans-NIH cooperative agreement and engaging in scientific stewardship (Network on Emotional Wellbeing), internal institute-specific policy work (NICHD Director Dr. Diana Bianchi's 2022 Appropriations Hearing Briefing Book), and co-organizing a Trans-NIH Congressionally directed conference on Youth Mental Health Disparities. Throughout this past year I have received training in program administration and manage part of a grant portfolio on children's social, emotional, and family processes. In addition, I have carried out an informal detail with NICHD's Office of Legislation, Public Policy, and Ethics where I have extended my experience in federal policy in Congress to include an understanding of how the federal agencies are impacted by and respond to

Congressional directives. Further, through the various Trans-NIH project scientist roles I lead and my involvement in helping to co-lead the NICHD STRIVE Health Disparities Research Committee, I've been involved in internal institutional efforts that drive the direction of the national research enterprise more broadly.

Portfolio Entry 1: Funding Opportunity Announcement, Notice of Special Interest (NOSI) COVID-19 Related School Disruptions Impact on Mental Health, Cognitive, Social, and Emotional Development of Children

Project Overview:

Background: The purpose of this NOSI is to highlight to the extramural research community that NIMH and NICHD share an interest in receiving grant applications for research to understand the mental health impact of the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic on school-aged children, specifically ages 3 - 12. Particularly, we are interested in research that can provide insight into the potential impact of primary instruction settings disruptions (e.g., pre-school, elementary school) on the mental health, cognitive, social, and emotional development of children. Applicants are encouraged to submit proposals on this topic through the NIH Research Project Grants Mechanism, indicating responsiveness to this NOSI through September 2022.

Goal(s): To support research studies that can provide empirical data to aid in public health decision making -- balancing health risks for various public health mitigation strategies affecting children in the current pandemic against their benefits as well as inform how to both be prepared and respond to future public health emergencies, including pandemics and disaster scenarios.

Contributions of Fellow:

- Co-drafted the NOSI language, in particular the section that specifies NICHD's specific research interests.
- Tracked incoming grant applications for this NOSI to manage appropriate referral to the correct institute and study section.
- Served as the Scientific Contact for grantees interested in submitting an application in response to this NOSI, responded to queries, and provided technical assistance to grantees.

Activity Focus Keywords: Funding Opportunity Announcement (FOA)
Policy Area Keywords: COVID-19, Pandemic response

Portfolio Entry 2: The NICHD STrategies to enRich Inclusion and achieVe Equity (STRIVE) Initiative Health Disparities Research Committee

Project Overview:

Background: Spearheaded by the Office of Health Equity, NICHD launched the STrategies to enRich Inclusion and achieVe Equity (STRIVE) initiative in 2021 to improve equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) in all aspects of the institute's research and workforce. One of the main themes of STRIVE, led by the STRIVE Health Disparities Research Committee, is to understand how to mitigate the root causes of health disparities and develop potential solutions to reduce or address these disparities through research. As part of this effort, the STRIVE Health Disparities Research Committee launched a five-part workshop series to develop cross-cutting topics and identify common themes of health disparities research across populations of interest to NICHD, through different levels of analysis (individual/dyadic/familial/community/societal/structural), and across lifespans and generations to target in potential future directions.

Goal(s): To develop an Action Plan that will outline concrete policies, activities and recommendations for improving the institute's health disparities research management and investments in order to mitigate the root causes of health disparities and develop potential solutions to reduce or address these disparities through NICHD's research. The Action Plan will guide changes in NICHD's activities and policies for the next 5 years.

Contributions of Fellow:

- Completed a literature review of areas for advancement in health disparities research and co-drafted initial concept and proposal for the five-part workshop series to highlight specific, cross-cutting areas of research to prioritize
- Co-led three out of five of the workshops in the series
- Co-drafted web content for the STRIVE initiative website
- Co-drafted and initiated the crowd-sourced information gathering campaign through IdeaScale for suggested improvements to NICHD's health disparities research

- Co-organized portfolio analyses to capture baseline descriptives on NICHD's health disparities research investments and identify gap areas (e.g., gaps in populations, ages, specific types or areas of health disparities research)
- Co-organized the STRIVE Health Disparities Research Committee
- Developed and drafted a concept for a community engagement art challenge focused on health disparities

Activity Focus Keywords: Workshops and scientific meetings, Strategic Plan Development
Policy Area Keywords: Health Disparities

Portfolio Entry 3: NIH Networks to Advance Emotional Wellbeing

Project Overview:

Background: The purpose of this cooperative agreement network that is led by the National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health (NCCIH) and the National Institute on Aging (NIA), with individual projects co-funded by NICHD, is to support the organization of a network of independent research networks so that experts can refine and test key concepts that advance the study of emotional well-being by facilitating transdisciplinary research in the social, behavioral, psychological, biological, and neurobiological sciences. The launch of this network of research networks follows an NIH roundtable discussion which led to a request for applications that focused on developing resources to refine and test key concepts that will advance and further support the study of emotional well-being. In 2019, NCCIH issued a request for applications that leverages the U24 cooperative agreement funding mechanism. The U24 is a resource development and planning mechanism in which interdisciplinary teams (networks) form to grow and develop research on specific priority areas.

Goal(s): To encourage meetings, conferences, small-scale pilot research, multidisciplinary cross training, and information dissemination among leading scientists across disciplines and institutions to foster the growth and development of research in the following priority areas: Ontology and measurement of emotional well-being, mechanistic research on the role of emotional well-being in health, biomarkers of emotional well-being, prevention research (mechanism-focused intervention development in target populations), technology and outcome measure development for mechanistic studies, development and validation of well-being measures.

Contributions of Fellow:

- Function as a project scientist on weekly meetings that focus on emotion wellbeing measurement, taxonomy, and communication and dissemination of network activities, products and findings.
- Attend meetings and contribute subject matter expertise to advance the network activities, such as identifying gaps, contributing to unified definitions, and ensuring that NICHD's priorities and populations are considered in the network activities.
- Co-write products that are meant to share and disseminate the activities, insights, findings and advances of the emotional wellbeing network with the broader community.

Activity Focus Keywords: Cooperative agreement, project scientist
Policy Area Keywords: Wellbeing, public health

Portfolio Entry 4: FY22 Appropriations Hearing Preparation, Briefing Book

Project Overview:

Background: The NICHD Office of Legislation, Public Policy, and Ethics (OLPPE) leads efforts to respond to congressional directives and prepare the NICHD Director, Dr. Diana Bianchi, for annual Appropriations Hearings. In preparation for the hearings, the NICHD OLPPE team reviews recent legislative items (e.g., Committee hearing summaries, new bill introductions and press releases, institutional letters) and conducts a review of the policy landscape at large to identify topical areas of interest to Congress. We then develop relevant briefs highlighting NICHD's work in these key areas that the director uses to prepare for the hearing. For the FY22 House and Senate Labor-HHS Appropriations Hearings, this includes a briefing booklet on NICHD's scientific progress and initiatives in specific scientific areas.

Goal(s): To provide information to Congress on NICHD's advancements, contributions, and impact in specific scientific areas of interest within the past year, to provide support for and strengthen annual discretionary funding allocated for the Institute.

Contributions of Fellow:

- Conducted quarterly reviews and drafted summaries and updates for pieces of legislation that were of interest to NIH and NICHD.

- Attended and drafted summaries of past Congressional hearings on topics of relevance to NIH and NICHD
- Led the drafting of briefs for Director Dr. Diana Bianchi's FY22 Appropriations Hearing briefing book
- Drafted questions and talking points, participated in practice hearing sessions to prepare Director Bianchi for Congressional hearing

Activity Focus Keywords: Federal policy hearing preparations
Policy Area Keywords: Congressional directives

Portfolio Entry 5: Youth Mental Health Disparities Research Conference

Project Overview:

Background: By charge of the United States Congress, the NIMH, in cooperation with the National Institute of Minority Health and Health Disparities (NIMHD) and the Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD), are leading the 2021 Youth Mental Health Disparities Conference, "Identifying Opportunities and Priorities in Youth Mental Health Disparities Research." This virtual conference will bring together a diverse group of youth mental health disparities researchers and other stakeholders and adopt a multidimensional, multidisciplinary lens to discuss the state of the science and to identify areas and opportunities for advancement and innovations to reduce mental health disparities among youth. We will be discussing these issues within four themed sessions that address disparities in a) mental health risk and etiology; b) detection, identification, and screening; c) mental health intervention and treatment services; and d) mental health follow-up care.

Goal(s): To leverage the lessons learned from the Conference about research opportunities and gaps and evidence-based solutions and therapeutic interventions, and to develop a Report to Congress signaling priority areas to advance research in addressing mental health disparities in youth.

Contributions of Fellow:

- Co-developed the conference concept and focus on understanding gaps and opportunities in addressing youth mental health disparities throughout a continuum spanning from disparities in mental health risk understanding and etiology through mental health follow-up care.
- Identified subject matter experts to serve as speakers for the different conference sessions

- Identified trans-agency leaders to include in a closed federal session
- Co-developed the meeting structure, format, and agenda
- Co-developed targeted questions for speakers and panelists
- Will be co-developing and co-drafting the Report to Congress

Activity Focus Keywords: Cross-Agency Collaboration, Written Report
Policy Area Keywords: Mental Health Disparities, Early Intervention

Read more about Parisa's fellowship experience