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February 2022 Spotlight on SRCD U.S. Federal Policy Fellow: Parisa Parsafar, Ph.D.

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Change lends itself to reflection. Throughout my transition from SRCD Executive Branch Policy Fellow in the Child Development and Behavior Branch within the *Eunice Kennedy Shriver* National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) to a permanent role in public service, I have reflected on how my fellowship placements at the National Institutes of Health (NIH) and in the U.S. Congress (as a former SRCD Congressional fellow) have shaped my views of the critical role developmentalists play in public health and our responsibility to ensure that developmental science translates into practice and policy.

As a graduate student, I focused my doctoral training on the interrelations between children's emotional health and cognitive processes. The focus of my research agenda was to better contextualize and understand how early negative emotional experiences and emotion-regulation skills shape learning and

health outcomes across childhood. Although I was not in an applied program, I recognized early in my training that the implications of my research could substantively inform public health. I was drawn to the SRCD Congressional Fellowship as a path forward, eager for the training that would allow me to marry my scientific toolkit with my content area expertise in developmental emotion science to advance public health policy and have a far-reaching impact on children's development. In particular, I looked forward to connecting and engaging with constituents – parents and their children, teachers and educators, health care practitioners, childcare providers, community organization members, non-profits, etc. – by meeting with them and listening to their concerns, and then using my scientific training and developing policymaking skills to help support legislation that could best serve them.

My time in Congress provided me with a unique opportunity to extend the breadth of skills and knowledge I acquired that year and apply them first-hand while helping review and draft legislation that shaped federal health and education policy. Over the course of just a few months I made the transformation from basic developmental scientist to policymaker! Gaining support for legislation required distilling complex health policies into easily digestible summaries meant for diverse audiences (e.g., drafting social media toolkits, opinion editorials, talking points, one-pagers, policy briefs and memos, etc.), affording me the chance to hone my science communication skills. The Congressional Fellowship experience taught me what it takes socially, practically, and politically to work alongside members of Congress from both parties and their staff to advance legislation. I learned how to gain support for legislation by building rapport and strengthening coalitions alongside non-governmental organizations, scientific societies, advocacy organizations, and local community groups. My analytic skills were optimized through the process of quickly reviewing legislation and drafting expedient policy recommendations. Critically, I learned how and in what format developmental research is used to inform policymaking at the congressional level and observed how it can impact the resulting legislative language and goals. A highlight of my experience was putting these skills into practice by working with my colleagues on moving a child development bill through the legislative process which would eventually become law.

Despite building an understanding of how developmental science had informed the goals of this legislation over the course of my fellowship, I recognized the existing limitations of my knowledge – I had little understanding of how developmental science might inform its implementation and the decisions made by federal agencies regarding which child development programs or targets to support to optimize the legislation's outcomes. Further, the meetings I held with constituents increasingly clarified that the gap and disconnect between scientific research, advocacy, and policymaking was hampering efforts to address

health disparities, and I was struck with an urge to be a part of the solution to bridging these gaps. Doing so would require an understanding of how congressional directives and their implementation impact the focus and priorities set by the research community, the makeup and diversity of the scientific workforce, the accessibility and application of research into policy and practice, and, importantly, how the directives support the broad dissemination of research findings and their incorporation back into policy.

Working to support changes in the way research and evidence-based intervention programs connect with policy requires a solid understanding of the existing research funding landscape. Recognizing these chasms in my own understanding of research-policy connections and how critical they are to addressing child and family health inequities prompted my desire to pursue the Executive Branch Policy Fellowship at the nation's leading medical research agency, the NIH. I have learned an immense amount about how biomedical and behavioral research is supported through the grants administration process and witnessed how federal funding impacts the scientific research enterprise. I've been able to leverage my training in developmental psychology and background in developmental emotion science to build an understanding of and support how biomedical research programs are administered and managed. I have sought diverse involvement in broader areas of the research funding process, including: (a) functioning as a project scientist for a trans-NIH cooperative agreement; (b) serving as a subject matter expert on a trans-agency coordinating committee; (c) supporting initiatives to advance changes in health disparities research priorities; (d) organizing conferences; (e) launching crowd-sourcing campaigns for feedback about NICHD's research directions; (f) drafting and revising program announcements; and (g) conceptualizing and managing a workshop series – all with the goals of identifying gaps in our scientific knowledge base and helping to develop ways to address them to support communities. Importantly, I have developed a rich understanding of how the research enterprise operates and how it has historically inadequately addressed but could in the future support the mitigation of health disparities - challenges I aim to address throughout my career.

As I transition from the fellowship to a role in public service, I feel a personal responsibility to ensure that I am leveraging the knowledge and skills I have developed across my fellowship journey to help address the gap I've recognized between research and health policy. I am committed to making full use of my experiences to better support these pathways between scientific research and health policy, including developing ways to improve the impact of research, addressing barriers to improving research outcomes, and ensuring that policy is scientifically-informed and a vital part of the solution to addressing societal inequities. Together, my fellowship experiences highlighted the need for breaking down silos across systems, disciplines, and sectors, and in doing so incorporating diverse voices, all coming together to

address public health problems. As I transition to my new role I am most excited to carry the lessons I've learned with me throughout the rest of my career and put them into practice to optimize the health outcomes of children and families.

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