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March 2022 Spotlight on SRCD U.S. Federal Policy Fellow: Jackie Gross, Ph.D.

Jackie Gross 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)

AUTHOR

Jackie Gross, Ph.D.

“We build evidence to improve the lives of children and families.[1]"

As SRCD U.S. Policy Fellows, we’re encouraged to reflect not only on the knowledge, skills, and experiences we hope to gain or contribute to our placement office, but also on the ways in which we hope to impact society. During the first year of my fellowship, while learning about government processes, exploring new research topics, and expanding my professional network, I found it quite challenging to pause and reflect on the bigger picture. Now that I am in the second year of my fellowship, it’s still challenging, but I feel better equipped to understand the connection between my daily tasks and the ultimate goal of improving the lives of children and families. Having been with my placement office for over a year, I’ve seen the interplay

between research and policy across a full federal fiscal year, which has given me some perspective on my role – and the role of research – in the bigger picture.

My fellowship placement is 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). The mission of ACF is to promote the economic and social well-being of families, children, youth, individuals, and communities who are resilient, safe, healthy, and economically secure. In support of this mission, OPRE studies the programs of ACF and the populations they serve through rigorous research and evaluation projects. In other words, "we build evidence to improve the lives of children and families.[1]" More specifically, I work within the Division of Child and Family Development (DCFD), which primarily conducts research on programs housed in the Office of Head Start, the Office of Child Care, the Office of Trafficking in Persons, and the Children's Bureau.

With so much to learn, it's easy to become absorbed by day-to-day tasks and miss the forest for the trees; returning to this overall mission helps me keep the work in perspective. It has also been helpful to experience a full annual cycle of OPRE's work with awarding and managing contracts, including the various ways that research and policy can inform each other across the cycle. The cycle begins with discussions to determine the highest priority research questions – the ones that can address the most critical, current issues faced by ACF programs and the populations they serve. Many of the research questions identified have the potential to inform important policy issues in the coming years, and so this first phase lays the foundation upon which all subsequent work can contribute to the primary mission of promoting the economic and social well-being of families and children.

The next steps are to develop requests for proposals (RFPs) to address those research questions and to award new contracts to support the work. Over the past year, I've had the opportunity to contribute to this part of the cycle by drafting sections of the statement of work for a new project's RFP and supporting the proposal review panel. The purpose of the project was to address key research gaps about how Head Start uses and/or participates in braided funding models (i.e., using more than one funding source), and how those models are implemented to provide high-quality, comprehensive early care and education services to communities. I learned how to review relevant legislation and previous literature to better understand the policy, programmatic, and research contexts of this project.

Once a contract is awarded, the project activities begin. Kick-off meetings provide a chance to discuss project goals at a high level, which can often bring the ultimate mission of helping children and families into clearer focus. Another early stage of the research is engaging a wide range of interested parties, such as subject matter experts, federal staff, state/local agency administrators, practitioners, data users, policymakers, and individuals with lived experience. Several projects I currently contribute to are in this active engagement stage, allowing me to see the critical importance of ensuring that everyone has a voice in the research. As one example, the *Reimagining NSCAW* project considers the future of the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being (NSCAW) – which examines child and family well-being outcomes as they relate to experiences with the child welfare system – including new data collection efforts, innovative design options, plans for dissemination, and solutions to previous project challenges. Strategically engaging with a range of collaborators for this project will ensure that any new research designs or data collection efforts will be methodologically rigorous, valid, and reliable, and that dissemination of findings will be effective and widespread. For instance, individuals with lived experience can help the project team think of new strategies for recruiting participants, inform the feasibility of data collection procedures, and provide first-hand knowledge about which issues are most salient for service recipients. Overall, actively seeking diverse perspectives can better meet the goal of understanding the well-being of children and families involved in the child welfare system.

I've also contributed to projects that are further along in the research process, where the primary goals include disseminating the knowledge gained from the research and translating the findings so they are accessible to policy audiences. This is a critical phase of the cycle for achieving the ultimate goal of improving the lives of children and families because, in order to be impactful, research must be communicated effectively to those who can benefit from it. My contributions within this phase of the cycle have included collaborating with the project team and program office staff to develop research briefs, reports, and other products such as toolkits for implementing lessons learned during the research. As one example, I helped develop a recently published research brief that uses data from the Early Head Start (EHS) Family and Child Experiences Survey (Baby FACES) to explore how the home-based option in EHS is supporting positive parent-child relationships. An overarching goal of Baby FACES is to inform national EHS program planning, technical assistance, and research by providing descriptive information about EHS services, staff, and children and families. Specifically, this brief can contribute to the larger mission by helping EHS programs and the Office of Head Start's training/technical assistance staff identify areas to support programs' efforts to promote responsive parent-child relationships.

Overall, in thinking about how I hope to impact society, it's helpful to reflect on the role of research in the bigger picture – how it can influence policy, enhance the public's knowledge, engage communities, and bring together groups that share a common vested interest. Reflecting on the past year and half, I'm reminded of the deep importance of the work being done by OPRE, as well as by all grant recipients, contractors, and staff across the federal government working toward the ultimate goal of improving the lives of children and families. I feel fortunate that the SRCD U.S. Policy Fellowship program has given me the opportunity to contribute to such important work.

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[1]https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre