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August 2022 Spotlight on SRCD U.S. Federal Policy Fellow: Marissa Abbott, Ph.D.

Marissa Abbott is a SRCD Federal Executive Branch Policy Fellow who is placed in the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (ASPE), U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS).

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Through the SRCD Federal Executive Branch Policy Fellowship, I have been able to observe firsthand how research has the potential to impact policy. As an interdisciplinary social scientist, I wanted to experience working in the federal government to apply my developmental science knowledge to emerging and timely research issues with policy implications. I am currently placed in the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (ASPE) within the US Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). In ASPE, I work in the Division of Data and Technical Analysis (DTA) within the Office of Human Services Policy. ASPE is a uniquely positioned policy research office that advises the HHS Secretary on a wide array of issues and is therefore well-situated to respond to requests across the catalog of health and human services programs. As

a part of the DTA team, I primarily support the child welfare portfolio. This entails supporting child welfare data projects, but I have also had the chance to engage in some work exploring well-being assessment across human services programs.

Most of my work concerns the Program Integrity and Effectiveness through Data and Analysis (PIEDA) project for the Family First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA). In 2018, FFPSA (Public Law 115-123) modified how states and tribes may use Social Security Administration Title IV-E funds that historically paid for foster care and permanency programs. FFPSA authorized new optional funding for states and tribes to provide time-limited, evidence-based, preventive services related to behavioral health, substance use, and in-home parent skills-based training to families involved in the child welfare system. PIEDA intends to link data between public child welfare and Medicaid agencies to improve the data infrastructure of states and increase their ability to analyze challenges experienced by families at the nexus of the child welfare and healthcare systems. Throughout this past year, I have been involved in the planning for this project, including helping to write the solicitation and preparing materials for the contractor related to state recruitment, feasibility studies, data linking efforts, and predictive analytics. In addition, I have represented ASPE in several PIEDA-related presentations and have been responsible for drafting briefs related to planning activities. I look forward to working with Mathematica, the contractor on this project, during the second year of my fellowship during which we will begin state recruitment for this project, present at upcoming conferences, and conduct research activities related to our work.

During my fellowship, I also led a project to better understand state data collection and evaluation efforts related to the Title IV-E prevention plans. Under FFPSA, states submit prevention plans for behavioral health, substance use, and other in-home services to the Children's Bureau (CB) in the Administration for Children and Families (within HHS) for approval. In these prevention plans, states include information about evaluation and continuous quality improvement efforts related to the services provided. For this project, I conducted key informant interviews with data and evaluation staff across eight states and prepared findings for internal stakeholders concerning technical assistance needs and policy implications. I presented my findings internally to ASPE leadership and am preparing to share my results with CB staff and administration. Working on this project strengthened my qualitative research skills and identified technical assistance and policy implications related to Title IV-E prevention plan implementation. Furthermore, this project helped me to develop the relationships and navigational skills necessary to work across offices within HHS. Finally, it gave me additional experience translating research findings into tangible recommendations for those involved in decision-making and priority-setting within HHS.

In addition, I have also been fortunate to support another small project exploring well-being assessment across domestic violence prevention and intervention and child support programs. I was directly involved in developing the project plan, focusing on key informant interviews and case studies led by our contractor, Mathematica. This project has provided me with great insight into project management tasks from the federal government perspective and has allowed me to use my research skills to think more broadly about the kinds of information that would be useful to government programs. This project will wrap up at the end of my first fellowship year, and I look forward to preparing memorandums related to project findings as I enter the second year of my fellowship. Even though this project is still underway, it has taught me that there is occasionally a disconnect between what federal staff thinks is happening at the state or local level versus what is happening in actuality. State and local partners are engaging in innovative work that we can capitalize on (with their permission) to leverage resources and share suggestions for implementation across federal programs. I have experience working in and with state governments, so this project felt full circle in solidifying my understanding of how federal agencies have the potential to better leverage best practices from state and local partners to improve federal programs and their surrounding policies.

During my first fellowship year, I have been fortunate to work on various projects related to my interests and expertise. I have applied my public health, social work, and child development background to better understand health and human services issues. I look forward to diving deeper into the diversity of ASPE projects during the second year of my fellowship, as well as addressing any new challenges that may arise. My experience thus far has encouraged me to seek out federal employment after fellowship completion, as I know that my skills and expertise are highly valued and that I have the potential to influence macro-level programs and policy.

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