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August 2022 Spotlight on SRCD U.S. Federal Policy Fellow: Neda Senehi, Ph.D.

Neda Senehi 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

Neda Senehi, Ph.D.

SRCD Executive Branch Policy Fellow
Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE)

Last September, I was delighted to accept my SRCD Executive Branch Policy Fellow placement in the Division of Child and Family Development within the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE), in the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) which sits in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. OPRE's mission is to conduct research and evaluation of ACF's programs which aim to promote the economic and social well-being of children, families, and communities. As I approach the end of my first fellowship year, I am grateful for the diverse training and mentorship opportunities that my placement at OPRE has afforded me within the science policy community at the federal level. Prior to the fellowship, my

academic research portfolio aimed to *understand* stress-related disorders and *inform* programming designed to promote health and prevent stress-related disorders in children and families experiencing adversity. My fellowship has allowed me to contribute my expertise and gain valuable insights and skills related to the associations between policy, programming, and research which aim to promote health and prevent poor outcomes in children and families experiencing adversity.

Through training and mentorship experiences at OPRE, I have honed my science communication and leadership skills. I have supported federal staff on project management of multiple grants and contracts in difference phases of their life cycles (from proposal development to award closeout). This has allowed me to experience a variety of support roles across these projects. I have been involved in OPRE's work on Head Start REACH: Strengthening, Recruitment, Enrollment, and Engagement Approaches with Families (HS REACH). This project aims to understand the populations that are being recruited, selected, enrolled, and retained in HS with a particular focus on HS-eligible families experiencing adversities (e.g., homelessness, foster care, substance use, etc.). During this project, I have utilized my expertise in quantitative and qualitative methods to inform the project's proposed analytical approaches. I have also advanced my verbal and written science communication skills through management of ongoing project activities, deliverables, and dissemination goals. This has included tracking project deliverables and supporting publication of dissemination products related to two OPRE funded projects including a review of literature for the HS REACH project and a summary of key indicators and findings from the Fall 2019 American Indian and Alaska Native Head Start Family and Child Experiences Survey 2019 (AIAN FACES 2019).

I have advanced my science communication and science translation skills as a member of OPRE's Self-Regulation Learning Agenda Team. This cross-divisional collaboration is focused on *translating* self-regulation science into evidence-based and strength-based strategies that mitigate the impact of early adversity and chronic stress on long-term health. Additionally, the learning agenda is focused on supporting the application of translated self-regulation science to different human service programs across ACF. The goal is to answer common questions about the measurement of self-regulation and how co-regulation relates to ACF's efforts to take a preventative and proactive approach to promote the wellbeing of children and families. As a member of this team, I have supported the development of a self-regulation learning agenda. I have participated in discussions focused on understanding, translating, and applying co-regulation science into human services across different program areas and populations served in ACF. I have applied my content expertise on measurement and development of self-regulation and co-regulation and drafted blogs focused on translation of co-regulation science within biological contexts into human services. In

collaboration with other team members, I have reviewed and contributed to publication of three OPRE Insights Blogs focused on (1) Co-Regulation and Connection in Human Services: Developing a Learning Agenda, (2) Co-Regulation and Connection in Human Services: Ongoing OPRE Projects, and (3) Co-regulation and Strengths-based Approaches to Human Service Delivery.

Through this fellowship, I deepened my understanding of leveraging basic and applied science to inform research agendas, policies, and programming. I have engaged in professional development activities including attending courses, congressional hearings, public briefings, conferences, and workshops on a range of topics involving early care and education research and policy within and outside of OPRE. I now know that the connection between policy and science is not a “one size fits all” model. In fact, effective policy making may be more of a cross-partnership, cross-collaborative process that is shaped by competing research priorities of diverse stakeholders with differing needs and agendas. These opportunities have advanced my understanding of incorporating equity, diversity, and inclusion in the relationship between research and policy. I have gained valuable insights into structural racism, models of social inequity, and social determinants of health disparities. For instance, addressing health disparities requires an equity lens to ensure equitable opportunities. However, there are barriers to equity that have not been identified or are difficult to address in a vacuum without acknowledging systemic and economic race-related inequities.

All of my experiences at OPRE have helped advance my understanding of policymaking at the federal level and its rewards and challenges. My work has been rewarding as it contributes to the effective planning and evaluation of rigorous research that impacts the lives of so many children and families served by ACF. I have learned about challenges such as social and economic barriers to incorporating an equity lens in early care and education research, policy, and practice. The research-policy narrative is written by many voices and this narrative informs priority topics in the science-policy community at the federal level. I have also gained valuable insights into ACF’s commitment to equity, inclusion and diversity including ACF’s evaluation policy and its commitment to produce evidence that has relevance, is ethical and independent of conflict and bias. In addition, I participated in discussions around equity and connected to a diverse network of science-policy professionals, stakeholders, program partners, leaders in research organizations, private industries, philanthropists, academics, and educators who all share the goal to advance the wellbeing of children and families in alignment with the goals of OPRE and ACF. I look forward to a second year in the fellowship of learning and growing in the science-policy space as I learn to best contribute to the well-being of children, families, and communities experiencing adversity.

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