NEWS | POSTED SEPTEMBER 1, 2022

SRCD Federal Policy Fellow Professional Portfolio Abstracts: Kelsey McKee, Ph.D.

2021-2022 SRCD Federal Executive Branch Policy Fellow at the Office of Head Start (OHS), Administration for Children and Families (ACF), U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

AUTHOR

Kelsey McKee, Ph.D.

SRCD Executive Branch Policy Fellow
Office of Head Start (OHS) in the
Administration for Children and Families
(ACF).
https://www.facebook.com/HeadStartgov
https://twitter.com/kelseyemckee

Introduction: This portfolio describes a selection of Dr. Kelsey McKee's work during her first fellowship year in the Office of Head Start (OHS) in the Administration for Children and Families (ACF). Dr. McKee's work at OHS includes a wide range of activities, including various efforts to support the Head Start workforce; coordinating and providing technical assistance on a variety of topics from early intervention to staff compensation; initiatives to best assess classroom quality in diverse settings; clarifications to policy related

to eligibility, recruitment, and enrollment; and collaborating with colleagues in different offices to facilitate the translation of science to policy and practice. These activities highlight the unique and multifaceted experience of working in a federal program office. This experience demonstrates the need for the integration of research and science-informed decision-making in the policy process. Finally, Dr. McKee briefly describes how the fellowship year impacted her understanding of the intersection of research, policy, and practice as well as her professional goals.

Portfolio Entry 1: Information Memorandum: Competitive Bonuses for the Head Start Workforce

Project Overview:

Background: One of the top priorities of the Office of Head Start (OHS) is supporting the Head Start workforce, who are the backbone of the Head Start program. Currently, there is a national workforce shortage that is particularly acute in the early care and education sector. Many Head Start programs are reporting difficulties recruiting and retaining staff, as many current or prospective staff members seek employment that is less challenging and offers better compensation. OHS supports grant recipients, who are awarded funding to operate individual Head Start programs, in efforts to stabilize the workforce. To that end, OHS is encouraging programs to utilize unspent operations and COVID relief funds to provide financial incentives to current and new employees, such as retention and hiring bonuses. In June of 2022, OHS provided policy guidance on the topic in an information memorandum (ACF-IM-HS-22-04) and held a public webinar to discuss the information memorandum with grant recipients.

Goal(s): 1. To help Head Start programs better compete with other employers in their local job market. 2. To provide guidance on how to design an incentive structure that meets a program's individual workforce needs. 3. To describe how to demonstrate necessity and reasonableness of the financial incentives, particularly in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. 4. To support Head Start program administrators in conversations with their governing body and Policy Council or policy committee.

Contributions of Fellow:

- Facilitated meetings with OHS staff across divisions, including members of (1) the Policy, Oversight, and Planning division, (2) the Comprehensive Services, Training, and Technical Assistance division, and (3) the Program Operations division, as well as with OHS leadership
- Authored the initial draft of the information memorandum

- Gathered and incorporated feedback from OHS staff (e.g., Regional Program Managers) and staff in other offices within ACF (e.g., Office of the General Counsel, Office of Grants Management)
- Served as the staff-level point of contact during the internal ACF clearance process.
- Co-authored the public webinar presentation and talking points for presenters
- Provided policy clarifications in response to questions submitted during the webinar
- Coordinated with colleagues in the Comprehensive Services, Training and Technical Assistance division to identify training and technical assistance resources to be updated or created related to financial incentives

Activity Focus Keywords: Community Collaboration; Policy Analysis; Strategic Plan; Policy Guidance
Policy Area Keywords: Head Start; Professional Development; Workforce Compensation
Knowledge & Skills Keywords: Evidence-based policymaking at the federal level; Effective communication between researchers, practitioners, and policymakers

Portfolio Entry 2: Technical Assistance to Congress on H.R. 7780 - Mental Health Matters Act

Project Overview:

Background: Federal agencies often provide technical assistance in the legislative process. Congressional requests for technical assistance include requests for federal agencies to review and provide feedback on draft legislation. The Office of Head Start (OHS) responds to such requests received by the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) that are related to the Head Start program. H.R. 7780, the Mental Health Matters Act, is one example, as ACF received a Congressional request to provide technical assistance on the bill. One title within the bill, the Early Childhood Mental Health Support Act, is focused on providing social-emotional and behavioral health interventions in Head Start programs.

Goal(s): 1. To provide technical assistance on the draft language of the legislation. 2. To provide technical assistance on how ACF would complete the initiatives outlined in the bill. 3. To provide cost estimates for implementation of the bill.

Contributions of Fellow:

- Provided technical assistance on how the draft language aligns with empirical evidence of social-emotional and behavioral health interventions

- Coordinated with colleagues in both the CSTTA and Policy, Oversight and Planning divisions of OHS as well as in the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE) and the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (ASPE) to provide feedback on the cost estimates for and implementation of the bill as currently written
- Responded to questions from the Congressional Budget Office on how OHS would enact the initiatives described in the bill

Activity Focus Keywords: Cross-Agency Collaboration; Policy Analysis; Technical Assistance; Evaluation; Congressional Collaborations
Policy Area Keywords: Early Intervention; Head Start; Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation (OPRE); Mental Health; Behavioral Health
Knowledge & Skills Keywords: Evidence-based policymaking at the federal level; What information policymakers need; Effective communication between researchers, practitioners, and policymakers; Incorporating a diversity, equity, and inclusion lens

Portfolio Entry 3: American Indian and Alaskan Native Programs CLASS Self-Review Pilot

Project Overview:

Background: The Office of Head Start conducts regular monitoring of grant recipients' performance and compliance with Head Start requirements. One aspect of the regular monitoring is an observation of the quality of teacher-child interactions in center-based classrooms, for which OHS uses the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS). Traditionally, an external reviewer conducts the CLASS review. However, OHS is conducting a pilot of a new review process for American Indian and Alaskan Native (AIAN) programs. In this pilot, staff members from within the programs are trained in the CLASS tool and conduct a self-review of their own programs. OHS completed the inaugural year of this self-review pilot in 2022, which included a feedback gathering process conducted through a contract administered by the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE).

Goal(s): 1. To support tribal sovereignty. 2. To promote professional development and quality adult-child interactions. 3. To identify if the self-review process is a feasible and reliable option for AIAN programs moving forward. 4.To gather feedback in order to optimize elements of the review process including planning, scheduling, logistics, documentation, training, and reporting.

Contributions of Fellow:

- Provided logistical support to the OHS contract organization coordinating the self-review pilot
- Reviewed and approved all communication, materials, and procedures used in the pilot
- Partnered with colleague in OPRE to design the structure and format of the feedback gathering process
- Co-authored the focus group questions and identified the goals of the feedback gathering process
- Facilitated the collaboration of multiple stakeholders including the contract organization conducting the self-review pilot; the regional office staff for AIAN programs; those leading the Community of Practice from the National Center on Early Childhood Development, Teaching, and Learning; federal staff in OPRE; and the academic researchers contracted to conduct the feedback gathering process

Activity Focus Keywords: Community Collaboration; Data Collection; Disseminate Findings; Evaluation; Monitoring/Audit; Survey Design; Transcribe Qualitative Data; Written Report
Policy Area Keywords: Classroom Quality; Community of Practice (COP); Head Start; Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation (OPRE)
Knowledge & Skills Keywords: Conducting research that's useful to policy and practice; Effective communication between researchers, practitioners, and policymakers; Incorporating a diversity, equity, and inclusion lens

Portfolio Entry 4: Webinar: Public Service Loan Forgiveness for the ECE Workforce

Project Overview:

Background: Head Start programs across the country are experiencing a workforce shortage and the Office of Head Start (OHS) engages in activities to better support the workforce. One cross-agency effort includes helping the early care and education (ECE) workforce, which includes Head Start staff, access the Public Service Loan Forgiveness program (PSLF). Currently the Department of Education is offering a limited waiver which provides enhanced relief and more flexible requirements for those who apply within a limited window of time. The vast majority of Head Start programs are qualifying employers for the program, which makes many Head Start staff eligible for student loan relief. The Office of Federal Student Aid (FSA) partners with the Office of Early Childhood Development (ECD) in the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) to provide outreach and information to the ECE field. In March of 2022, they hosted a joint webinar on the PSLF program for the ECE workforce for which over 17,000 people registered.

Goal(s): 1. To provide financial support for the Head Start workforce, and the ECE workforce broadly, in the form of student loan relief. 2. To increase awareness of the PSLF program in the ECE workforce. 3. To answer common questions and help applicants overcome barriers in the application process. 4. To direct applicants to the appropriate PSLF resources.

Contributions of Fellow:

- Reviewed and provided feedback on the Department of Education presentation on PSLF
- Co-authored promotional communications for the Head Start community and facilitated their distribution in coordination with the OHS communications team
- Co-authored the talking points for the Deputy Assistant Secretary for the Office of Early Childhood Development
- Co-authored the Q&A content for the Deputy Assistant Secretary for the Office of Early Childhood Development and the Deputy Assistant Secretary for the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services
- Coordinated the technical logistics with both the ACF and HHS communications offices to accommodate an unexpectedly large audience, including through streaming the webinar live on HHS TV
- Co-authored participant polling that was conduced live during the webinar.
- Provided live technical assistance to presenters and attendees during the webinar.

Activity Focus Keywords: Community Collaboration; Cross-Agency Collaboration; Policy Analysis; Policy Guidance
Policy Area Keywords: Head Start; Professional Development; Workforce Compensation
Knowledge & Skills Keywords: Evidence-based policymaking at the state level; Effective communication between researchers, practitioners, and policymakers

read more about Kelsey's fellowship experience