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September 2022 Spotlight on SRCD U.S. Federal Policy Fellow: Lorena Aceves, Ph.D.

Lorena Aceves was a SRCD Federal Executive Branch Policy Fellow who was placed in the Office of Head Start (OHS), Administration for Children and Families (ACF), U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS).

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As a second year SRCD Federal Policy Fellow placed within the Office of Head Start (OHS), I realized over the course of my fellowship experience that my perspective of how research, policy, and practice operate together to serve children and families has shifted. As a first-generation Latina, I have gained a world of knowledge and experience that I could not have gained otherwise.

In the first year of my fellowship, I spent most of my time working for the policy division of OHS. I found that this experience provided me with a great foundation to understand the policy operations of a federal program like Head Start. I became familiar with the Head Start Program Performance Standards and how my colleagues work to ensure that they are implemented properly by grant recipients. I also had the opportunity to experience how a program office shifts and prepares when there is potential legislation that could impact how the office operates, such as the Build Back Better Act. I have had to think on my feet and quickly shift

perspective and content focus to fulfill the office's needs. Given that my fellowship took place during a pandemic, most of the shifting was to address pressing needs related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

In my second year, I decided I wanted a more holistic OHS experience, so I moved to the Comprehensive Services and Training and Technical Assistance (CSTTA) division. I decided to switch divisions because I wanted to learn more about the applied side of Head Start initiatives. I worked closely with the federal project officers of the National Center on Health, Behavioral Health, and Safety (NCHBHS), which is a training and technical assistance (TTA) center jointly funded by the Office of Child Care. My work with NCHBHS began with participating in meetings with federal staff and national center staff, where I learned about how content related to health, behavioral health, and safety is created and shared with Head Start grantees. As I became more familiar with NCHBHS' work, I was able to review content and materials focused on recommended health and behavioral practices produced by the center with key attention to equity and inclusion. My involvement with NCHBHS, through this work, showed me the integral role a program office plays in the content and materials that are shared with Head Start grant recipients.

Another integral experience I had in my CSTTA work was the wonderful opportunity to dive into program data and analyze it with a programmatic lens. The first data project I conducted was focused on child incidence reporting in Head Start. Given that I have a unique perspective of being trained as a developmental scientist and understanding the questions my colleagues at OHS would have about the data and the information they would want to know, I packaged the findings in a way that was digestible and accessible for my OHS colleagues. I presented these findings to a cross federal (e.g., offices within the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)) and national center workgroup on behavioral health which has since been used to inform work in the larger early childhood space.

The second data project I had the pleasure of conducting is related to family engagement reports of how grant recipients support families to gain economic stability. The family engagement data is managed in a dashboard which tracks all the qualitative data entries from Head Start grant recipients. The federal project officer in charge of the OHS National Center for Parent, Family and Community Engagement had questions about how grant recipients were helping families gain economic stability. Based on the questions the federal project officer had, I created my own data set, followed by a presentation and report to share what I found. The findings were also shared with the National Center for Parent, Family and Community Engagement. The new skills I acquired through diving into data with the training and technical assistance team demonstrate

that data isn't examined from a theoretical lens as is typical in academia, but instead from an understanding on what grant recipients should be doing to support family well-being and trying to understand what strategies may be working that could be useful for programs that are struggling to support their families. These data analyses have real life implications for program operations and the children and families served by Head Start.

Another notable experience in my second year of the fellowship was the opportunity to engage in detail. I proposed to my office and the Institute of Education Sciences (IES)'s National Center for Education Research (NCER) the idea of doing a detail where I could focus on work that could potentially build a bridge between our offices. Thankfully, I received full support from IES/NCER, OHS, and SRCD. In my detail, I spent 5 hours per week reviewing 20 years of grant data in the early childhood portfolio of NCER. I spent my time identifying how many grants focused on dual language learners and Head Start samples. I presented my findings to the NCER team and the Office of English Language Acquisition at the U.S. Department of Education. The sharing of my findings spurred a conversation about needed updates to data management of IES grants, given all the challenges I encountered in compiling data. The findings also highlighted the need for more equitable research on these populations. I am currently working on brief reports that I will share with my office, and which will be available to the public. The goal is to replicate these analyses with other IES research portfolios.

Finally, the highlight of my time with OHS was serving as part of the inaugural Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility (DEIA) commission cohort. As part of this commission, I have been able to help with DEIA efforts across the office. Much of our time is spent organizing and engaging our colleagues in topical discussions through different events during the year. I had the honor of working on the Hispanic Heritage Month and Black History Month initiatives. I was able to exercise my creativity by being the marketing lead which involved creating Zoom backgrounds and materials to share with our colleagues related to these months. I also led and helped facilitate discussions that led to deep and engaging conversations about how we can do better within our office and as a society!

I am grateful that I spent almost 2 years with my OHS family. All the amazing experiences I had at OHS have expanded my view of how research, policy, and practice intersect and expanded my skills and knowledge as a developmental scientist. The best thing I took from my time at OHS was the importance of remembering our humanness. All the amazing individuals I worked with have such a strong commitment to bettering the lives of children and families, which is apparent by how they treat each other and the passion and love I saw

transpired in the work they do every day. The Office of Head Start became a second home and family where I not only found myself as a developmental scientist, but also as a person.

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