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2023 SRCD Federal Policy Fellow Spotlight: Tamarie Willis, Ph.D.

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In a few sentences, what is your role at the agency you work for?

My role at the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE) provides me the opportunity to support federal staff in their oversight and management of various contracts and grants. In this capacity, I am involved in several research and evaluation projects spanning from the grant development and administration to national evaluations aimed at measuring state/local level differences in policy implementation.

What has been the most memorable project you have completed during your time at the agency?

One of the most unique projects I get the opportunity to be a part of is the Replication of Recovery and Reunification Interventions for Families-Impact Study (R3-Impact). The project explores the relationship of parental substance use and its impetus for certain children who are entering the foster care system. The unique part of this project is that it utilizes a model of peer recovery coaching as a strategy aimed at supporting [these] parents in their recovery, help keep families safe and together, and reduce the time spent in foster care if placement is necessary. The peer recovery coach model is one that I am familiar with from my previous work in the criminal legal system and am familiar with its feasibility and effectiveness. I am happy to see this model applied to the child welfare system as it highlights the utility of engaging those with lived experience as experts in navigating these issues.

What words of wisdom might you pass on to someone who is interested in SRCD's fellowship program?

I have had the opportunity to speak to a couple graduate students who have expressed interest in applying once they have completed their program. And by far, the question I have been asked the most is how can I draft an essay to make it stand out? And my advice to them is to let your passion shine through in your writing. A Ph.D. comes with lots of technical training in research, and the fellowship board knows this, so spend less time discussing these points. You should speak to how this training has fueled your passion to address a certain issue, and critically reflect on existing public policies (or the lack thereof) relative to this particular area. And my advice once they are in the fellowship would be to exercise patience with themselves as they reconcile what they already know and what they are learning.

What has been your favorite aspect of SRCD's fellowship? Please explain why.

My favorite part of the fellowship by far has been my exposure to diversity of projects happening within OPRE and the larger Administration for Children and Families (ACF). I get to see the thoughtfulness, diligence, and rigor that goes into every decision that is being made by federal staff pertaining to projects. I also enjoyed building a little community with my cohort of other fellows. I have learned so much from them and I feel fortunate to have met such amazing people.

Why should someone else apply for this fellowship?

This fellowship is a good option for those who are looking to deepen their understanding of the connection of public policy at the federal level and its implications for setting the tone for what issues take priority and the availability of grant funding. A graduate program is amazing at equipping individuals with expertise and knowledge, but there are some things you only learn by experience. My current experience with this fellowship is that it is an education in itself.

What is your favorite place you have traveled to?

My favorite place so far where I have travelled would be Morocco. It was an awesome adventure. I spent a week in Casablanca and a week in Marrakesh. I visited the Rick's Café which was designed as a replica of the bar made famous in the classic movie Casablanca. I submitted to the calls to prayer at the Hassan II Mosque, which is the largest functioning mosque on the African continent and is the 7th largest in the world. I rode a camel through and camped in the Agafay desert and visited a remote Berber village in the Atlas mountains. But by far, my favorite thing was eating my weight in msemen (a traditional Moroccan pancake) and mint tea. It was a magical trip.