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2023 SRCD Federal Policy Fellow Spotlight: Marissa Abbott, Ph.D.

Marissa Abbott is a former SRCD Executive Branch Fellow and Current Social Science Analyst in the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (ASPE).

AUTHOR

Marissa Abbott, Ph.D.

SRCD Federal Executive Branch Fellow
Office of the Assistant Secretary for
Planning and Evaluation

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

During my fellowship, I was placed in the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (ASPE) within the US Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). 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.

In my fellowship at ASPE, I worked in the Division of Data and Technical Analysis (DTA) within the Office of Human Services Policy (HSP). As a part of the DTA team, I supported the child welfare and well-being portfolios, including child welfare data linking efforts. After completing my fellowship early, I accepted a position in ASPE as a Social Science Analyst in the Division of Children and Youth Policy in HSP.

What interested you in becoming an SRCD Policy Fellow?

I was interested in exploring a career in public service and wanted to get a better understanding of what it is like to work for the federal government as a policy researcher. I hoped to apply my public health, social work, and developmental science background to child welfare and other intersecting human services issues. I also wanted to gain a better understanding of government research management.

How do you think the fellowship has helped further your career?

When I transitioned from the fellowship to a career in public service, I felt fortunate to have been placed in ASPE and given the autonomy to work on and lead projects related to my interests and expertise. I started my new position at ASPE/HSP as a Social Science Analyst in the Division of Children and Youth Policy about seven months ago. I have since been able to propose and manage new research projects, conduct my own research, participate in the federal budgeting process, and plan and execute a child welfare convening, building upon my knowledge and expertise while gaining several new and valuable skills.

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

Take a chance and apply for the fellowship! I did not think I was a competitive applicant and almost closed myself off from this incredible professional development opportunity. I am so grateful that I stepped outside my comfort zone and set myself up for success through this program. I would not have gained the same insight into the plethora of non-academic jobs, especially federal jobs, available to policy researchers without this experience.

What piqued your interest in working in policy?

Before my doctoral education, I had completed a state government epidemiology fellowship. Then, when I returned to graduate school, I was lucky to work with ASPE through the Institute for Research on Poverty (IRP) at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. As a project assistant with IRP, I also worked with the Wisconsin

Department of Children and Families and the Wisconsin Child Abuse and Neglect Prevention Board. I should have had an inkling that I would end up back in the policy world, but I needed to finish my dissertation to see that I wanted to do more applied policy research and management.

What do you like to do in your free time?

In my free time, I teach barre3 fitness classes and like to spend time with my partner and two pups, Clark and Addison! We've enjoyed exploring all the DC has to offer.