NEWS | POSTED APRIL 10, 2024

2024 SRCD Federal Policy Fellow Spotlight: Tamarie Willis, Ph.D.

Dr. Tamarie Willis is a second year SRCD Federal Executive Branch Fellow in the Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation (OPRE) in the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

AUTHOR

Tamarie Willis, Ph.D.

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

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 with 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 grant development and administration, to national evaluations aimed at measuring state/local level differences in policy implementation. I also help to train incoming SRCD fellows to OPRE on the tasks and responsibilities involved in managing the Early Care

and Education Research Scholars: Head Start Dissertation Grants.

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

While I was in academia, I felt I was prepared for an academic faculty position in which to continue/expand my research. I have always been interested in public policy, but I feel that this fellowship has worked to further ground me in the importance of not only conducting research to deepen our understanding of certain issues, but to also conduct research in ways that has direct policy implications for the population I am studying. I have been exposed to many fields outside of academia in which my skills as a researcher and newly gained knowledge and experience of working in a federal office can be an asset. My focus has shifted from singular to varied, to my benefit. I am grounded in my understanding of the work I want to do, but the fellowship has opened my eyes to possibilities, the academy or otherwise, of where that can be done.

What piqued your interest in working in policy?

My interest in public policy was piqued during my undergraduate program in a child welfare public policy course. The professor had previously worked as a child welfare lobbyist and had also cemented themself as a child welfare scholar. That was the first class I had taken where I got a detailed understanding of policies specific to a certain population of children, but also an understanding of the adverse implications of well-meaning but poorly thought-out/implemented policies and how they can impact the lives of those who are most vulnerable. Equally as important, I learned the value of research in helping to shape, shift, and shed light on issues, and its influence on key decision makers.

What has been an interesting professional development opportunity you have completed during the fellowship?

I was able to attend a two-day meeting in Philadelphia on dual-system youth that was hosted by Evident Change and the Drexel University Juvenile Justice Research and Reform Lab. Dual-system youth are those who have had prior or concurrent involvement with both the child welfare and juvenile justice systems. The event brought about very fruitful discussions around the various issues impacting this population of youth. Over the two days, the group landed on some key issues we felt were most salient and actionable for both research and policy. A few themes that I observed as we engaged with and listened to the stories of individuals with lived experience, were their own parents/families histories with incarceration or child welfare involvement, and some overlapping involvement with the U.S. immigration system. There were also

meaningful conversations from those with lived experience on the need to provide access to gender affirming care, mainly in privately operated foster care agencies. The event really demonstrated the meaning of intersectionality, of not only of systems but within the issues affecting those most marginalized.

Where are you from?

I moved to DC from the beautiful state of Michigan.

What do you like to do in your free time?

In my free time, I've really enjoyed visiting the museums in the area. My favorite, by far, has been the National Portrait Gallery. The museum currently has two pieces that I always gravitate to whenever I visit; the John F. Kennedy portrait by Elaine de Kooning, and the Toni Morrison portrait by Robert McCurdy.

MORE ABOUT THE 2023-2024 COHORT