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2024 SRCD Federal Policy Fellowship Spotlight: Toria Herd, Ph.D.

AUTHOR

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SRCD Policy Fellow 2023-24 cohort

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

As a fellow in the Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Division of Child and Family Development, I support federal staff in managing policy-based research grants and contracts. I contribute to many child care and child welfare related initiatives by contributing to projects evaluating Administration for Children and Families (ACF) programs, disseminating and translating research findings to different audiences, and working to understand how research evidence is used by our program offices in their policymaking.

What piqued your interest in working in policy?

As a grad student, when I started to realize that scientific publications rarely, if ever, reach decision makers. I knew I wanted to use my scientific skills to bridge the gap between science and policy by translating research for policy audiences—providing them with the necessary evidence to guide their decisions for optimal support of children and families. In recent years, I've become passionate about ensuring science is disseminated in formats that are accessible for and digestible to different audiences, and right now, government seems like a good place to do that.

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

In a word—networking. Not only is there a large and impressive network of alumni of the fellowship willing to support you as you continue your professional development, but the title of Fellow itself has opened numerous doors for me in D.C. I have met so many interesting people working in science policy in positions at all levels. Since I'm still figuring out exactly where I want to land, the exposure to so many remarkable people and career options has been invaluable. Beyond opportunities for networking, the fellowship has enabled me to expand my skillset to include identifying policy-relevant research questions, grants management, and synthesizing lessons learned across grantees and projects in a way that can inform future research and practice/policy.

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

I am currently supporting the Prevention Services Evaluation Partnerships grants. These grants aim to support summative (i.e., impact) randomized control trial or quasi-experimental evaluations of a mental health, substance abuse prevention and/or treatment, in-home parent skill-based, or kinship navigator program or service. The grants support collaborations among evaluators and partnering Title IV-E agencies, community entities, and/or researchers that have experience in working with foster children or children in kinship care arrangements to conduct well-designed and rigorous summative evaluations of programs and services intended to provide enhanced support to children and families, including pregnant and parenting youth in foster care, as well as prevent child abuse and neglect and foster care placements. I help to convene the grantees monthly to discuss their projects and offer insights on next steps. It has been an interesting and unique experience to hear about multiple distinct projects with common goals, brainstorm through challenges, and draw connections across projects.

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

As an SRCD fellow, you also have access to the AAAS professional development opportunities. I recently attended a seminar led by political scientists who laid out the political dynamics that drive congressional decision-making – in general and in our current time. I came to understand the unique political dynamics at work in today's Congress, the challenges congressional leaders face in executing a legislative agenda, and their impact on federal agencies and programs. As someone who has always been interested in politics, working in government during such an interesting time in political history has been fascinating, and seeing the impact of other branches of government on my work in the executive branch has been eye-opening.

What is your favorite place you have traveled?

Last year I spent 10 days on the beautiful beaches and in the jungle of Belize. The snorkeling was incredible, the food was delicious, and I did a tour through the Xunantunich Mayan ruins to learn about the history and culture of the ancient civilization. I would absolutely recommend, especially if you love water as much as I do!