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May 2019 Spotlight on the SRCD Policy Fellow: Marisa Morin, Ph.D.

2018-2019 Federal Congressional Policy Fellow

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I have wanted to be part of the SRCD policy fellowship ever since I was an undergraduate student. Although at that time I did not understand just how meaningful a researcher could be informing policy, I was drawn to the question of how to bridge the research-policy gap. The SRCD policy fellowship always seemed to be the ultimate way to find an answer.

As a developmental psychologist who has focused most of my research on evaluating parenting programs and supports for vulnerable families, I was fortunate to find a placement so well-matched to my interests and academic background. The SRCD Congressional fellowship has offered me the opportunity to work in the office of Ranking Member Ron Wyden (Oregon) and the Senate Finance Committee. I work on the human services portfolio, which means that I cover issue areas that are particularly important for children and families, such as child welfare, home visiting, and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF).

I spent most of my time in graduate school working on analyzing parent-child interactions for the Mother and Infant Home Visiting Program Evaluation (MIHOPE), which is the legislatively mandated evaluation of the Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV) program. Yet, it was not until I started this fellowship that I understood that this national evaluation was only possible due to work done in the Senate Finance Committee since it has jurisdiction over MIECHV. During this fellowship, I have engaged in the process of legislating such demonstration projects and witnessed how Congress values evidence-based policy.

This fellowship has been just as much of a platform for me to expand my content knowledge, as it has been on-the-job training on policy and the daily duties of a Senate staffer. Something that you learn very quickly is that Congressional staff are often responsible for covering many different content areas, even if they are thematically similar. This means that part of being a Congressional fellow is being challenged with learning new policy areas and trying to quickly become as much of an expert on them as humanly possible. I spent the first couple weeks of my fellowship placement just reading to try and expand my expertise on parenting to a functional understanding of workforce development, child welfare financing, immigration, higher education, and even tax. On top of that, you need to master the ability to switch between all of these policy areas at a moment's notice.

In many ways, I won the Congressional placement jackpot. A unique aspect of my fellowship experience is that I started at a time when the Senate Finance Committee had already passed a landmark child welfare law, the Family First Prevention Services Act. This could have meant that my year would be spent in the non-child welfare space of the Senate Finance Committee. Instead, I have been afforded the rare opportunity to closely monitor and influence the implementation of Family First and with that, collaborate on a bipartisan, bicameral basis to support implementation. This has allowed me to not only have a window into the workings of the Senate Finance Committee's counterpart in the House, the Ways and Means Committee, but also a direct connection with the Children's Bureau within the Department of Health and Human Services that is responsible for implementing the law.

I am so grateful to SRCD for making this fellowship experience a possibility and to my host office for being willing to take on a fellow and embracing me into the office.