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April 2019 Spotlight on the SRCD Policy Fellow: Rachel McKinnon, Ph.D.

2018-2019 Federal Executive Branch Policy Fellow

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When asked about my experience as an SRCD Policy Fellow, I sometimes find myself at a loss of words. I struggle because I have had the tremendous opportunity of serving as both a Congressional Branch Policy Fellow and an Executive Branch Policy Fellow. The two Fellowships are not automatically coupled but the complementary experiences have contributed to a greater depth of my understanding of policy making and implementation than I imagined.

My guiding principle has always been to close the gaps between children from low-income families and their higher-income peers. Through my academic training, I embrace the importance of context in children's development, asking questions about how aspects of children's environment can be amplified to support children in developing into the best versions of themselves. I have come to understand that policies that aim to improve the lives of children and families have the greatest potential to affect the most children. As a researcher, it is my responsibility to provide policy makers with the evidence to make the most informed

decisions about programs for children and families.

Last year, in my Congressional Branch Fellowship, I was placed in the office Senator Robert P. Casey, Jr., to work on education, LGBTQ, and immigration policy issues. I worked closely on the re-authorization of an education bill that was ultimately passed into law. While the focus of the bill was not directly tied to my area of expertise, I witnessed the inner processes of law-making. I saw an idea with the best of intentions shaped and developed through politicians who wanted the best for their constituents, practitioners who wanted to ensure the practicability of implementing the policy, and advocates who wanted to make sure the policy would meet the needs of students.

This year, I have seen the implications for the federal and state agencies tasked with executing a new law with sweeping changes. In my Executive Branch Fellowship, I am placed in the Office of Child Care (OCC) in the Administration for Children and Families in the Department of Health and Human Services. OCC administers the Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) which provides child care subsidies for low-income working families. The law that sets the requirements for CCDF, the Child Care and Development Block Grant Act, was reauthorized in 2014 with substantial changes to the requirements expected of States, Territories, and Tribes. My fellowship began with an in-depth review of States' triennial CCDF Plans that serve as an application for their CCDF funding. This Plan cycle is the first in which States are expected to be in full compliance with the new requirements and I witnessed in real time the culmination of States' substantial efforts to put in place the necessary infrastructure and processes. The remainder of my fellowship will entail starting even earlier in the process with Territories and Tribes as they begin to undertake the new CCDF requirements in their upcoming CCDF Plans.

These two Fellowships are not offered as a package-deal: I went through the application and interview process for both. Yet, serving both Fellowships has granted me with a deeper understanding of how to use research to affect change in programs that serve children and families, with entry points at the legislative policy-making level and as the reverberations of policy change permeate the federal-, state-, and local-agency levels. Through my SRCD Policy Fellowships, I have honed my skills at presenting evidence-based recommendations to policy-makers in ways that they will be able to employ, ultimately positioning me to achieve my goal of supporting the widest breadth of children and families.