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March 2019 Spotlight on the SRCD Policy Fellow: Francesca Longo, Ph.D.

Francesca Longo, Ph.D., 2018-2019 Federal Executive Branch Policy Fellow

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Having spent the last year on the Hill as a Congressional Fellow, the transition into the Executive Branch Fellowship has been interesting and exciting. While I loved learning about a wide range of new policy topics affecting the lives of families and children (e.g., home visiting in the military, immigrant family separation, SNAP, healthcare, apprenticeship, taxes), by the end of the fellowship year I realized I missed having a clear focus on early childhood education. Therefore, I was very fortunate to receive an Executive placement in the Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Child Care. The Office of Child Care (OCC) is primarily responsible for the administration of the Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) – a block grant to state, territory, and tribal governments to support families with paying for child care.

An entire office devoted to child care?! I clearly hit the early childhood jackpot! I had read the Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG) Act that Congress passed in 2014, and with my newfound understanding

of the legislative process, I would get to see the other side of the coin – how the Act was being implemented. If that was not enough, I was there when Congress doubled the discretionary portion of the funding from $2.9 to $5.8 billion for FY2018 and FY2019, and I would now see firsthand how state, territory, and tribal governments used the new funds.

OCC was in the middle of reviewing the FY2019-2021 CCDF Plans for approval, and I was able to observe the complex process my very first day in the office! Serving as an application for the CCDBG funds, States and Territories are required to submit these plans every three years. They provide a description of, and assurance about, the grantee's child care program and all services available to eligible families. It was fascinating to see how the different divisions within OCC (i.e., policy, program operations, monitoring, and technical assistance) worked as a team to make sure states were being held to consistent standards across the nation. Since plan approval is such a large endeavor, I was given the opportunity to jump right in and start contributing as part of the team. It was so exciting to be able from day one use my expertise in early childhood substantively!

It became clear that we would need an organized way to keep track of all of the information we were receiving from States. I used my analytic skills to create a database that tracked conversations with States and subsequent decisions made. When conditional approval letters were sent to States in December, it felt like a monumental accomplishment! But the work did not stop there – these data needed to be summarized for a diverse array of stakeholders both within and outside of the federal government.

While the CCDF State Plans dominated the first few months of my fellowship, there are other fascinating projects that I have the opportunity to be a part of as well. I am contributing to the needs assessment evaluation for the OCC managed Preschool Development Grant Birth through Five grants. I am leading the Quality Progress Report (QPR) which collects information from States and Territories to describe investments to improve the quality of care available for children from birth to age 13. From developing informal guidance documents to leading a national call on the content of the QPR, I am in charge of every step in the process. The researcher in me cannot wait until we get the reports back to have the unique opportunity to look across the Plan, QPR, and ACF696 to get a rich picture of how states are improving the quality of child care!