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December 2018 Spotlight on the SRCD Policy Fellow: Sarah Blankenship, Ph.D.

Sarah Blankenship, Ph.D., 2018-2019 Federal Executive Branch Policy Fellow

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The activities of the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE) in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, where I am completing the second year of my fellowship, are cyclical, repeating each fiscal year: in the winter we develop new research questions, in the spring we release requests for proposals, in the summer we review proposals, and in the early fall we award new contracts, all while managing the contracts that were awarded in previous years. With the beginning of the second year of my fellowship closely coinciding with the new fiscal year, I have been able to take on new leadership roles and greater responsibility on the projects that I helped develop in the first year.

One of the contracts I am currently helping to manage aims to identify barriers and promising solutions to states' implementation of interstate background checks as mandated by the Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG) Act of 2014. Because comprehensive background checks of this nature have never been used for employment purposes, states are facing a number of challenges coming into full compliance with

the law. Through this contract, OPRE aims to help the Office of Child Care (OCC) identify areas ripe for federal support.

Working on such a high-priority project of national importance has been an invaluable professional development opportunity in a number of ways.

First, it has taught me highly relevant lessons on the organization and functions of the United States government that add a depth and tangibility beyond what could be taught in a civics course alone. Specifically, working on this contract has highlighted the distinct, yet complementary functions of the legislative and executive branches of our government. For example, Congress passed the law to provide increased protections for children enrolled in publicly subsidized child care. The Office of Child Care was then tasked with regulating and enforcing this legislation, including coordinating necessary supports and technical assistance to facilitate states' full compliance. This contract has also provided me with a new perspective on the benefits and challenges of our federalist system of government. Many of the challenges states face in implementing the interstate background checks have arisen from differences in the organization of state agencies, state data systems and processes, and state legislation. In this case, the existence of separate state systems may be a factor affecting states' abilities to comply with federal laws and regulations.

Second, my involvement with this project is teaching me valuable professional skills in management and coordination. Under the guidance and mentorship of federal staff, I am learning effective ways of communicating with and managing contractors; tracking project activities, budgets, and timelines; reviewing project invoices and progress reports; convening experts; and providing constructive feedback on deliverables. Because implementation of background checks is a high priority for many federal offices, I have been afforded the opportunity to coordinate and collaborate across divisions, offices, and agencies. While at times challenging, these opportunities for collaboration have helped me better understand the roles, responsibilities, and priorities of different stakeholders and ensure that government resources are used efficiently and non-duplicatively.

Volunteering to assist with this project almost a year ago was certainly a step outside of this developmental neuroscientist's comfort zone, but I am continually rewarded by the potential impact of this work, my ongoing learning, and the ability to work closely with so many committed colleagues in OPRE and OCC.