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July 2018 Spotlight on the SRCD Policy Fellow: Alaina Flannigan, Ph.D.

2017-2018 Federal Congressional Policy Fellow

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Since interning with a non-profit advocacy group for child maltreatment prevention during grad school, public policy has been one of my passions. The SRCD Policy Fellowship has been the perfect opportunity to bridge research and policy. I have learned so much about the process and politics behind policymaking while also contributing to a variety of projects.

My year in Congress has been spent with the Democratic staff of the Joint Economic Committee (JEC) under Ranking Member Senator Martin Heinrich of New Mexico. The JEC is an advisory committee with members from both the Senate and the House of Representatives that monitors the economic conditions of the country and provides input on economic policy. We write many different types of products like blog posts, fact sheets, and longer reports. In addition to staffing JEC hearings, I have had the opportunity to cultivate a broad portfolio of topics, including housing, health care, and childhood poverty. Two of the products I am most proud of are a chapter on rural housing in our nearly 200-page report on the rural economy and a

report on the economic costs of childhood poverty to be released later this year.

A large thematic focus of my research centers on a holistic systems-level view of the lives of children and youth who have interactions with the child welfare system. In writing about different topics like housing and health care, I got a better sense of how different facets of a family's life can impact their ability to raise healthy, happy children. When families cannot find affordable housing—regardless of income level or age, many people and families struggle to afford their rents and maintain a mortgage—they lose access to the stability and resources that safe, adequate housing provides. Similarly, when families lack access to health care, they have to make tough choices when dealing with physical and mental health needs. Struggling to make ends meet really taxes a family's capacity for caregiving.

With the passage of the Family First Prevention Services Act earlier this year, Congress has signaled its commitment to preventing children from entering or remaining in the foster care system. If we really want to see effective primary prevention—that is, fewer families who have interactions with the child welfare system in the first place—we have to invest in families early on by supporting affordable housing, access to health care, nutrition assistance, and other basic needs. I have a better appreciation for the way these systems are all linked to create the nourishing environments that children need for healthy development, and I want to work towards producing research that integrates these systems as intervention and prevention targets. In this past year, I have had the privilege to work amongst the staffers who keep Congress running behind the scenes. I have received wonderful supportive mentorship from my colleagues on the JEC staff, and I hope to continue to produce work that informs policy decisions for children and youth.