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

2017-2018 Federal Executive Branch Policy Fellow

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I first heard about the SRCD Policy Fellowship in my second semester of graduate school, while attending the SRCD Biennial Meeting in Seattle, Washington. From that point forward, I knew I wanted to pursue this experience – to learn about the intersection between developmental science and human services policy firsthand. Despite having my sights set on the Fellowship for so long, I never could have imagined how valuable this experience would be and how much I would learn in only eight short months.

As a Fellow, I am hosted by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), Administration for Children and Families (ACF), Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE). Broadly, OPRE conducts research and evaluation of ACF programs to inform policy decisions. My division, the Division of Child and Family Development, primarily conducts research on programs housed in the Office of Child Care, the Office of Head Start, and the Children's Bureau. At the most basic level, you could describe OPRE's day-to-day activities as grants and contracts development and management. In consultation with our program partners,

we develop a research agenda, select research questions, and write contracts for external firms to bid on. Once a contract has been awarded, we oversee the execution of contracted activities: from refining the research questions, deciding which research methods to employ, monitoring data collection and analysis, and reviewing final reports and other dissemination activities. I am currently involved with seven contracts. Each contract is in a different stage of development or execution, so I have been able to participate in all phases of the contract lifecycle. In addition, OPRE funds a number of grant programs, including the Child Care Research Scholars dissertation grants, for which I function much as a program officer. In this capacity, I participate in developing the Funding Opportunity Announcement (FOA), organizing the application review, and performing grant monitoring activities. I am also involved in planning six sessions and a pre-conference grantee meeting at the two research conferences our division coordinates throughout the year. Through these activities, I have learned an immense amount in terms of both content and process and many things that lie somewhere in-between.

As a developmental cognitive neuroscientist who studied brain structure and function during middle childhood, I had limited expertise in or knowledge of early care and education or infants and toddlers before beginning the Fellowship. The transition to OPRE has provided an exciting (and daunting) opportunity to learn this entirely new content area and developmental period. In the past eight months, I have learned and am continuing to learn about the state of the field, the gaps in our knowledge, the experts, the commonly-used methods and measures (especially qualitative, process-oriented, and quality measurement), and the language to effectively (and accurately) communicate on these topics.

In addition to content, I have learned an incredible amount about federal programs for vulnerable children and families, namely the Child Care and Development Fund and Head Start, and the governmental systems and processes that direct their implementation and evaluation. I have learned about the differences and synergies between legislation, regulation, and practice: about the roles of the House, the Senate, the President, and the executive branch agencies in creating, funding, and regulating social service programs; about where and why there are flexible or rigid regulations and challenges with compliance; about how federal offices consider enforcing or revising regulations for program improvement; and about how these factors are affected by federal-to-local and federal-to-state funding. I now have a working knowledge of (and an active interest in!) budgets and appropriations: how budgets are developed and approved, how our contracts are structured to align with fiscal year budgets, and how changes or lapses in appropriations impact our new and ongoing projects and operations.

I have learned about the processes, considerations, constraints, challenges, and supports for planning and conducting federal program evaluation research. I am now familiar with the many different forms evaluation research can take, the various methods that can be used, and how to determine which method is most appropriate given the current state of the literature and the ultimate goals of the project. Every study is carefully designed to be maximally responsive to our program partners' goals, interests, and decision-making needs. Those priorities and information needs may be influenced by recent changes or upcoming plans for reauthorization, appropriations, legislation, or regulations. For this reason, from my perspective, there is much greater thoughtfulness and consideration at a project's inception about the implications of potential findings and how they can be most appropriately communicated to and used by program offices and policymakers. This purposefulness of our office's activities has been a notable deviation from the basic research that I was accustomed to in graduate school.

I have been so deeply impressed by how thoughtful, critical, and knowledgeable my OPRE, SRCD, and program partner colleagues are. Their dedication to underserved children and families is apparent and inspiring. After eight months, I am still starstruck every day. I am working alongside the real change makers: from the presidential appointees and staff who make regulatory decisions, to the project officers and contractors who are carefully designing studies to inform federal programming, to the staff who are writing legislation and congressional talking points, to the many, many other individuals and organizations who inform and support these activities. These people shape federal programs and how they serve America's most vulnerable populations. I am humbled daily, and I cannot express my appreciation for this incredible opportunity afforded to me by SRCD.