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March 2018 Spotlight on the SRCD Policy Fellow: Kelly Jedd McKenzie, Ph.D.

2017-2018 Federal Executive Branch Policy Fellow

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I pursued the SRCD policy fellowship because I wanted to learn about the translation of research to policy making and to gain hands-on experience in policy work. I am currently in my first year as an Executive Branch Fellow placed in the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (ASPE) in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). ASPE operates within the Office of the Secretary of HHS, and is the Secretary's principal advisor on policy development. My division, within the ASPE office of Human Services Policy, conducts policy analysis and research on policy issues that impact children and youth.

The primary focus of my work has been childhood trauma, adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), and trauma-informed care. This has been very rewarding for me since I first became interested in child development as an undergraduate doing research on childhood adversity and working in the community to raise awareness of ACEs. In graduate school, I studied the impact of trauma (specifically, child maltreatment and deprivation) on brain development, working to understand how the structure and function of the brain

changed following early life stress. While I found that work to be critically important to our understanding of the negative impact of adversity, I felt removed from policies that could enact change in the lives of children and families. Now, I find that I am able to use my background and expertise to inform practical applications and learn more about how to address childhood trauma in our communities.

My position within ASPE has provided me the unique opportunity to interact with many different agencies working to address childhood trauma. I organize a monthly call with federal partners to share ongoing efforts to implement trauma-informed approaches and to foster collaboration across agencies. I spent the first few months of my fellowship familiarizing myself with federal investments that help meet the needs of children, youth, and families who have experienced trauma, and I work to follow other state- or community-level efforts to build resilience. Part of my job is to stay informed about ongoing work in this field, and to respond when relevant policy issues crop up.

Between professional development trainings, meetings within ASPE, attending congressional briefings, and just being immersed in this new culture of government, it is hard to fully grasp how much I have learned over the past six months. Still, every day unfamiliar issues and topics arise, reminding me how much I still have to learn and challenging me to see things from a different perspective. In addition to my trauma work, I have developed knowledge in and contributed to a number of areas that are new to me, particularly early care and education, including child care, Head Start, and preschool. This has been a great opportunity to learn about how policies are developed and implemented, getting a birds-eye view of the national investment in early childhood development.

The fellowship is a unique opportunity because it allows someone like me, with a background in child development but relatively little concrete policy experience, to jump into a policy role and experience firsthand the process of translating research to policy. I have really enjoyed the process and feel confident that this experience will open up a career path that I find fulfilling and engaging. I am excited to see what the rest of my time in the fellowship will bring, and am grateful for the support I have received from SRCD and my colleagues in ASPE.