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December 2017 Spotlight on the SRCD Policy Fellow: Jenessa Malin, Ph.D.

2017-2018 Federal Executive Branch Policy Fellow

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As a second year SRCD Executive Branch Policy Fellow, I have leveraged the insights of my first year to take on new opportunities and responsibilities in my placement. I work in the Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation (OPRE) in the Administration for Children and Families (ACF), U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). ACF aims to improve the social and economic wellbeing of children and their families and my office, OPRE, conducts research and evaluation projects of relevance to ACF programs and populations. My work at OPRE has primarily focused on research projects related to early care and education (to inform ACF's Office of Head Start and Office of Child Care) and child abuse and neglect (to inform ACF's Children's Bureau). I have worked on a number of projects ranging from small-scale feasibility studies and research syntheses to large-scale national studies. Each project brings its own complexities and requires different methodological, technical, and communication skillsets.

A highlight of my second year has been co-leading the Child Maltreatment Incidence Data Linkages (CMI Data Linkages) project. This new project will examine the feasibility of linking administrative data such as those from child welfare, health, social services, education, and public safety agencies to better understand child maltreatment incidence and will examine factors (e.g., organizational capacity, infrastructure, resources, etc.) that may promote or impede the scaling and enhancement of linked administrative data.

Throughout my time at OPRE, I have learned about the wide array of data collected by federal, state, and local governments for non-research purposes and efforts within the federal government to make better use of that administrative data (e.g., the Commission on Evidence-Based Policymaking). With the support of my placement, I applied for and received a scholarship to attend a data science training program focused on linking and analyzing government administrative data. Through this program, I have learned both new programming languages (e.g., SQL, Python) and new data analytic approaches (e.g., machine learning) increasingly utilized to answer research, policy, and programmatic questions. I have also learned about many of the challenges associated with accessing and using administrative data.

My colleagues in OPRE have been incredibly supportive of my professional growth, encouraging me to take advantage of external training opportunities like this one and taking time out of their busy days to provide invaluable mentorship. Many of my colleagues are former SRCD Fellows who care about investing in the next generation of policy-research scholars. It has been extremely rewarding to take a step back and appreciate how much I have grown over the past year and to simultaneously recognize that the learning process is far from complete. I am grateful to be here for a second year, contributing to the rigorous and relevant work conducted at OPRE.