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

2016-2017 Federal Executive Branch Policy Fellow

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The SRCD Policy Fellowship offers a unique opportunity to serve as a bridge between research and policy. I am currently completing my first year as an Executive Branch Fellow placed 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. My office, OPRE, conducts research and evaluation projects of relevance to ACF programs and populations. My work at OPRE has primarily focused on early care and education (e.g., Head Start and Child Care) with a particular focus on programs serving infants and toddlers.

Over the course of the last year, I have had the opportunity to produce and translate scientific research addressing issues of concern to policymakers and programs. 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, content, and communication skillsets.

The projects, while very diverse, all contribute to a broader, purposeful research agenda that aims to push the field forward and serve the needs of ACF program offices (e.g., the Office of Head Start and the Office of Child Care).

In addition to working on a wide array of research and evaluation projects, I also serve on OPRE's internal Methods Team. In this role, I help to ensure that OPRE staff members are informed about best practices in quantitative and qualitative methods and can produce research of the highest quality. This has been a natural extension of my graduate training in measurement, statistics, and evaluation and has allowed me to share some of my own quantitative expertise with others at OPRE.

OPRE often engages with policymakers and practitioners who do not regularly consume research. It has been both challenging and rewarding to improve my communication skills in an effort to disseminate research that is concise and digestible to multiple audiences. In doing so, I have been able to take a step back and consider my own program of research through a new lens. This experience has compelled me to think more deeply about the broader impact of my work and consider what it really means to say research has implications for policy or practice.

OPRE is an extremely collaborative work environment and each project is able to capitalize on the varied and numerous strengths of multiple individuals. A number of my colleagues are former SRCD Policy Fellows themselves and have provided strong mentorship and support throughout my fellowship year. I am incredibly fortunate to work among and learn from intellectually curious and motivated colleagues who all share a commitment to producing rigorous and relevant research. I am looking forward to returning for a second year of the fellowship and continuing to be part of the vital and thought-provoking work conducted at OPRE.