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January 2017 Spotlight on the SRCD Policy Fellow: Marina Mendoza, Ph.D.

2016-2017 Federal Executive Branch Policy Fellow

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The roaring tides of change are here! I knew my second year would fall during a presidential transition; however, I did not expect it to be as extraordinary as it has turned out! Transitions come with uncertainties and anxieties, but what remains unquestionable is the vital role that research plays in informing policy.

My placement is at the National Institute of Justice (NIJ); the research, development, and evaluation arm of the U.S. Department of Justice— a place with a commitment to using science to advance justice. I am collaborating with social science analysts, federal partners, researchers, and practitioners on developing a research agenda for justice involved young adults (18-24). This issue gained traction partially because of groundbreaking studies in the developmental sciences.

The data show us that young adults are disproportionately arrested and incarcerated and nearly half return to prison within three years following release. This recidivism trend suggests that our current approach (nail

‘em and jail ‘em) is not working. Further, research in the developmental sciences tell us that psychosocial and brain development is still occurring well into our 20’s. So, while they may look like adults and be considered adults by law, young adults may still have tendencies that look closer to adolescents than older adults. The exchange of information between researchers, practitioners and policy makers has pushed this issue forward in a unique way. Across the criminal justice system, many are beginning to consider that the biggest “bang for the buck” may lie in providing developmentally appropriate services and programming to justice-involved young adults. Having a justice system that appropriately responds to criminal behavior of young adults has the potential to help them rebuild their lives and reduce future criminal activity, which in turn can reduce the number of future victims.

This project is a great example and reminder that research has real policy implications. Our research in the developmental sciences provides valuable insight to complex policy issues. This year has been unpredictable, yet I am certain now more than ever that evidence informed policies are necessary. I am continually grateful for the opportunity to be an SRCD Fellow and proud to work alongside brilliant scientists who use science to advance justice and public safety across our country.