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May 2016 Spotlight on the SRCD Policy Fellow: Tracy Clopêt, Ph.D.

2015-2016 Federal Executive Branch Policy Fellow

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As I progressed through my graduate career, I started to become interested in working at the intersection of research, policy and practice. I began to explore alternative career paths and kept hearing that the options were endless, but I struggled to identify exactly what those options were. Several of my peer colleagues joined think tanks, consulting firms, and university-affiliated centers or took postdoc positions. The choices felt a little overwhelming. And then I found the SRCD fellowship.

The fellowship provides a unique blend of exposing you to policy work, in my case through a placement at the Office of Child Care (within the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services' Administration for Children and Families), while also providing professional development opportunities. The fellows meet monthly with the wonderful SRCD staff to process our experiences together, hear from early childhood experts in the field and discuss intersections of research and policy. This year, we've had the opportunity to meet with representatives from the non-profit, university, foundation and public sector spaces, just to name a few. This

is a wonderful complement to our day-to-day work in our placement offices as it really helps us think about the broader implications of our experience.

Much of the learning I've gained this year is process oriented. The fellowship has provided me with a rich opportunity to explore the inner workings of the government, which has brought up many questions along the way –*What's the distinction between a political appointee and a civil servant and what does that mean for their work and tenure? How do the various levels of government interact (e.g. Federal, State, local)? How are the offices/agencies/divisions/departments structured and how can you work across them? I'll highlight a few examples that brought these questions to light for me, but to gain the full picture I whole heartedly recommend considering the fellowship for yourself!*

What's the distinction between a political appointee and a civil servant and what does that mean for their work and tenure? Within the Office of Child Care, the Director is a political appointee, and as such is tasked with carrying out the vision of the Administration through the Office of Child Care. A political appointee is therefore tasked with blending the President's agenda with the operations of their Office. I've had the opportunity to work closely with the Director, preparing briefing materials and talking points on topics spanning from best practices in infant and toddler care to ways to support parents pursuing education or job training. I've witnessed the fineness it takes to move a political agenda forward, while staying true to the children and families served by the program. It's a delicate balance and one that requires diplomacy and excellent support staff. It's also important to note that when a new President is elected, these political appointees must resign from their duties and allow the incoming President the opportunity to appoint whomever they deem fit. In the lead up to an election year, it's been fascinating to see this transition first hand.

How do the various levels of government interact (e.g. Federal, State, local)? The Office of Child Care administers the Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF), which is a subsidy program for low income, working parents to access high quality child care for their children. At the end of 2014, the CCDF law was reauthorized for the first time in nearly 20 years. The reauthorized law includes several new provisions pertaining to health and safety, quality and consumer education. To provide support for the delivery of its programs, the Administration for Children and Families has divided the country into 10 regions, placing federal staff in each region to keep the lines of communication open across the country. This year, I have served as the liaison to a region in the west spanning 4 states, 3 territories and several American Native tribes, providing support for the interpretation and implementation of the law. I have been able to see how the Federal policy is translated down to these different levels of government and delivered to children and families in those localities. The governance structure in these different localities makes some of the new

pieces of the law challenging to implement. For instance, a small territory may include providers that speak several different dialects of the same language making it challenging to provide training materials that can be universally used across the territory. Or in a large state spanning urban and rural areas there are challenges in setting subsidy rates that meet the adjusted costs of these vastly different contexts. I've learned through this experience that a *one-size-fits-all* approach doesn't actually fit all and the flexibility that is allowed within the block grant structure of the CCDF program is necessary to meet the diversity of needs of families across the country.

How are the offices/agencies/divisions/departments structured and how can you work across them? The Administration for Children and Families houses both the Office of Child Care and the Office of Head Start, which are both responsible for overseeing early childhood programs. While there are many differences in the delivery and scope of these programs, both provide services for children and families from low-income backgrounds. Despite working with similar populations, there are often silos in the work we do. There's been a growing recognition that there is rich learning that can be shared across these programs. In partnership with fellows and staff from the program offices, as well as the Office for Planning, Research, and Evaluation, we have started a series of Early Childhood Research meetings to share work across the agency. It's been such a rich learning experience to hear how the offices can inform each other's work. There have also been challenges in finding ways to communicate across offices – one salient theme that has stood out is how to make research accessible to multiple audiences. This gathering is helping to dissect ways to do that so we can effectively share our work.

Earlier this year, I also had the opportunity to help plan an event that was hosted at the White House and co-sponsored by the Departments of Health & Human Services and Education, as well as other private sector partners. The event was focused on early learning in STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) and was a beautiful example of bringing together leaders in government, public and private sector spaces to work together toward a shared goal of enhancing opportunities for our youngest learners. The day fostered a feeling of collaboration – it became evident that there is so much potential in this line of work and no one can go at it alone. As the old saying goes, two heads are better than one. And, in this case, many more than two!

These are just a few of the wonderful experiences I've had so far as a fellow. It's been such a rich year of learning, including some lessons I'm sure I won't fully grasp until I have time and space to reflect on the experience as a whole. I'm grateful for the support of my host office, the Office of Child Care, the broader Administration for Children and Families community and Marty Zaslow and the SRCD Policy and

Communications team for affording me this honor. I'll be forever grateful for your guidance and mentorship.