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May 2014 Spotlight on the SRCD Policy Fellow: Julie Leis, Ph.D.

2013-2014 Federal Executive Branch Policy Fellow

AUTHOR

Julie A. Leis, Ph.D.

I am fortunate to be an Executive Branch Fellow in the Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation (OPRE) in the Administration for Children and Families (ACF). As the research arm of ACF, OPRE is responsible for evaluating the efficiency and effectiveness of programs aimed at improving the well-being of low-income children and their families.

My work in OPRE cuts across two of the three divisions: the Division of Child and Family Development (DCFD) and the Division of Family Strengthening (DFS). Working across divisions has been really beneficial as I have been exposed to a wide variety of content areas, methods, and people. My portfolio includes projects on topics related to responsible fatherhood and healthy marriage, research on Hispanic populations, early care and education, parenting, and children's health.

One of the projects that I've learned a great deal from and enjoy working on most is the Fatherhood and Marriage Local Evaluation and Cross-site Project. This project aims to support high quality data collection, strengthen local evaluations, and conduct cross-site analysis for responsible fatherhood and healthy marriage (RF/HM) grantees. RF/HM programs work with non-custodial fathers and low-income couples, respectively, providing classes on how to strengthen romantic relationships, improve parenting, and become economically self-sufficient. The project began shortly after I started which has allowed me to be engaged in the development of the project and the study design. RF/HM programs are mandated by legislation (Section 403 of the Social Security Act) so the work we are doing on this project is very applied, which is exactly the experience I was hoping to gain through the fellowship. We work closely with the Office of Family Assistance (OFA), the program office responsible for funding these grants, to identify priorities, assist with the development of funding opportunity announcements, and identify resources for grant applicants and grantees. We also collaborate with the contractor for the project to develop the study design and protocol and identify constructs and measures for the study. My involvement in this work has taught me a lot about project management, how to discuss research with program partners, and has expanded my knowledge about the field of RF/HM. It's truly exciting to be involved in the early stages of a project that has important implications for both practice and the research field in this area.

Another really fun aspect of the fellowship is the ability OPRE provides to attend meetings on interesting topics with experts in the field. OPRE facilitates meetings to discuss issues related to research in a certain area or to have experts consult on a question of interest. There are also often meetings of Technical Work Groups for specific projects as well as grantee meetings. These events provide a forum for observing and learning from experts and have deepened my understanding of the complexity of the work we do.

I am extremely grateful to SRCD for providing me with this amazing experience. I have learned from wonderful mentors in OPRE and SRCD who have influenced my thinking and expanded my understanding of the issues low-income children and their families face and how we can use research to improve the programs that serve them. I look forward to continued learning and growth through my fellowship.