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July 2013 Spotlight on the SRCD Policy Fellow: Michelle J. Boyd, Ph.D.

2012-2013 Federal Executive Branch Policy Fellow

AUTHOR

Michelle Boyd, Ph.D.

I am a first year Fellow working on the Democratic staff of the U.S. House of Representatives Ways and Means Committee. I divide my time between the Health Subcommittee and the Human Resources Subcommittee. At the beginning of my Fellowship, I worked in the personal office of Representative Fortney “Pete” Stark before he lost his reelection race in November 2012. As a result of this arrangement, I have had the opportunity to explore a diverse set of issues and develop a more nuanced understanding of federal health and public assistance policy. Due to the jurisdiction of the Committee, my work has typically focused on programs authorized by the Social Security Act, including Medicare, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), child support enforcement, and child welfare, foster care, and adoption assistance. However, there have been opportunities to work on and learn about issues beyond the Committee’s jurisdiction, for instance, when collaborating with Members’ personal offices and other Committees.

Typical tasks during my Fellowship year have included: Assisting with preparation for hearings, preparing memoranda for Members and colleagues, meeting with stakeholders (e.g., constituents, advocates, and lobbyists), attending briefings and seminars, and working on legislation. One aspect of the work that I have appreciated is the opportunity to explore specific policies in depth, which has included reviewing rules or regulations (e.g., notices of proposed rulemaking and final rules promulgated by federal agencies) and discussing these with federal agency representatives.

At the outset of my Fellowship year, I was primarily focused on the role of research in the process of forming policy. I am very fortunate to work with colleagues that value and request research, and utilize it to develop and recommend sound, evidence-based policy. However, in the last several months, it has become more apparent that there are other factors that have the potential to influence the policymaking process and, in some cases, trump the reasoning that research can provide in shaping policy. These internal and external influences include: politics, procedures, and the press. In order to be effective in policy activities, one must acknowledge, understand, and utilize these levers. Thus, I have made efforts during the Fellowship year to develop my understanding of the political landscape, develop a working knowledge of legislative procedures, and observe the role and influence of the press, especially as it relates to the policy issues within my particular portfolio.

My Fellowship term thus far has provided me with invaluable experiences working as a developmental scientist in a policy setting. The work has been demanding and multifaceted, but it has been worthwhile and rewarding. I have been fortunate to work with experienced colleagues who have provided their insight and guidance and given me opportunities to learn and develop expertise. They have been wonderful mentors, role models, and guides for navigating a complex and everchanging environment – and as a policy novice, their patience and support have been greatly appreciated. I am grateful to SRCD for the opportunity to grow personally and professionally and gain a new perspective of our government and its democratic functions.