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June 2013 Spotlight on the SRCD Policy Fellow: Lindsey Hutchison, Ph.D.

2012-2013 Federal Executive Branch Policy Fellow

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Prior to starting the SRCD Fellowship, I had just completed my doctoral degree and had very little in the way of policy experience. I felt both excited and nervous about the opportunity to work in an area that was completely new to me. To date I have completed 9 months of the Fellowship, and, looking back, I am truly amazed at how much I have learned about how research can be used to inform policy and program development.

I am a first year Executive Branch Policy Fellow in the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (ASPE), within the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). ASPE is situated within the Office of the Secretary of HHS and is the principal advisor to the Secretary on policy development. The focus of my work is on early childhood, primarily on issues related to early care and education services for children from low-income families. I am fortunate to have entered ASPE at a very exciting time for early care and education policy. The Obama Administration's newly proposed early learning initiative has drawn more

attention to this issue than any other Administration in recent history. Further, the leadership in my office is particularly invested in early care and education policy, so this topic has been a focus in my office from the beginning of my Fellowship experience. My time at ASPE has been spent primarily 1) collaborating with my colleagues on different projects focused on early care and education, and 2) responding to quick turn-around requests from office leadership for syntheses of current research findings on a variety of early care and education topics.

Currently, I am working on a number of projects focused on early care and education services for low-income children and families, including Head Start, childcare, and preschool, with a particular focus on the quality of and access to such services. These projects often involve a variety of different tasks, such as regular meetings and collaboration with office colleagues; synthesizing current research on a topic area that I may not be that familiar with; consulting with non-federal expert researchers; and developing short policy briefs for non-research audiences. My time spent on these projects has broadened my understanding and knowledge base on a range of topics in early childhood development, greatly sharpened my communication skills, and provided me the opportunity to engage with many prominent researchers in the field.

One way that being a Fellow in ASPE is different from many other Executive Branch placements is that staff often get requests from office leadership to provide responses to policy-relevant research questions in a very short period of time. For instance, I may be asked to provide a one to two page memo describing the most current research findings on statefunded pre-kindergarten programs, and their impacts on child outcomes. I would likely have a day or less to gather this information together and prepare the memo. Often, my office leadership takes this information to meetings with HHS leadership, including the Secretary of HHS, or other federal agencies. This kind of work has increased my ability to be flexible, and taught me to balance these short-term requests with my longer-term projects. I have also learned how to summarize research findings for non-scientific audiences in a very clear, quick, and concise manner – a skill I did not gain much practice with in graduate school, where students often write lengthy research papers over the course of a semester or longer.

Overall, the Fellowship experience has helped me to develop both personally and professionally, and I am very appreciative to SRCD for providing me with this wonderful opportunity. I have had the unique chance to witness our democratic system from the inside, and I am inspired by the hard work that federal employees engage in daily to maintain and enhance services for our country's neediest children and families. Most importantly, I have cultivated a new network of friends and colleagues that will undoubtedly be supportive and valuable in whatever future career path I pursue.