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March 2013 Spotlight on the SRCD Policy Fellow: Amanda Clincy, Ph.D.

2012-2013 Federal Executive Branch Policy Fellow

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With recent calls for greater investments in high quality early care and education (ECE) by the Obama administration, even in the midst of looming budget cuts, I began my SRCD Executive Branch Fellowship in the Office of Planning Research and Evaluation (OPRE) during a time when the work of our office appears to extremely relevant to important policy decisions. As the research arm of the Administration for Children and Families (ACF), OPRE is primarily responsible for advising the Assistant Secretary on ways to increase the effectiveness and efficiency of programs aimed at improving the economic, social, and emotional well-being of children as well as their families. OPRE is in a unique position to contribute to the ECE conversation given that a substantial portion of our efforts are directed towards conducting rigorous program evaluation, research synthesis, and descriptive and exploratory studies in this area.

Indeed, my portfolio includes several projects that have direct implications for providing comprehensive early childhood services that promote the social, emotional, and cognitive development of low-income

children and support families in furthering their child's healthy development. For instance, the Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting Program (MIECHV) funded through the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (2010) attempts to expand home visiting programs to improve the health of at-risk mothers and their children. The majority of MIECHV funding is given to states to implement one or more evidence-based home visiting models. My role on this project is to help states formulate rigorous evaluation plans to test the effectiveness of the models being implemented. The hope is that this work will produce novel contributions not only to each state regarding how they serve families with young children, but to the field of home visiting as a whole. This work is critical given effective home visiting programs are one of several components that create a comprehensive early childhood system.

Working on MIECHV and other projects focused on the Child Care Development Fund (CCDF), a block grant awarded to states to assist low-income families with child care, has caused me to expand my thinking about data systems. More specifically, it has caused me to think more deeply about effective and cost efficient ways to measure services families receive as well as national, state and community -level changes in child and family well-being. Capturing this information is critical in order to ensure continuous quality improvement in the early childhood system. Administrative data can be an invaluable source of information about children and families over time. However, there is a great need to build states' capacity to use data to answer key questions that have implications for policy and practice. OPRE has several funding mechanisms that directly and indirectly help states improve the collection of administrative records as well as integrate and coordinate data systems across state agencies.

Lastly, the projects in my portfolio have allowed me to hone and develop my dissemination skills, particularly dissemination to multiple audiences including policy makers, program offices, and practitioners. For example, my primary role on two descriptive studies of Head Start and Early Head Start is to develop research to practice briefs and other products that are concise, digestible, timely, and relevant to various audiences. Dissemination is integral to expanding the reach of the knowledge generated by our office about how early childhood programs serve vulnerable children and families.

I am greatly appreciative of the incredible learning opportunity that the SRCD Policy Fellowship has provided. It has given me a platform to apply my training as a developmental psychologist to the very policy-relevant work that is being conducted on a federal level to improve early childhood systems nationwide. I am also grateful for the numerous professional development opportunities that have allowed me to connect with individuals in foundations, state government, contracting firms, and non-profits who are also attempting to tackle these complex issues.