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February 2013 Spotlight on the SRCD Policy Fellow: Akilah Swinton, Ph.D.

2012-2013 Federal Executive Branch Policy Fellow

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I am in my second year as an Executive Branch Policy Fellow in the Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation (OPRE) within the Administration for Children and Families (ACF). OPRE serves as principal advisor to the Assistant Secretary for Children and Families on increasing the effectiveness and efficiency of programs designed to improve the well-being of children and families. OPRE primarily oversees research and evaluation projects to assess program performance and inform policy and practice. My experience working at OPRE has been very unique because I work on projects across all three divisions: the Division of Child and Family Development (DCFD), the Division of Economic Independence (DEI), and the Division of Family Strengthening (DFS). My diverse portfolio has allowed me to learn about a wide variety of topics, thus maximizing my Fellowship experience.

My work at OPRE has helped me to develop an understanding of how various activities contribute to policy-making. My portfolio includes projects on topics related to child care and early childhood education, child

welfare, economic selfsufficiency, and research on Hispanic populations. Each project has taught me something different about policy. My work with a grant program for dissertation research on child care has allowed me to gain knowledge about how the grant process works on a federal level, including the conception of the funding opportunity announcement, the review process, and post-award grant monitoring. From my work with planning two expert meetings – one on the well-being of Hispanic children and families and another on the transition from kindergarten – I have been able to observe how researchers can help to guide future policy-making decisions by using their knowledge to advise government agencies.

I also work with several research projects including an evaluation of services helping youth transition out of foster care and an evaluation of job training programs. From these projects, I now understand how contractors contribute to federal policy and support the work of the government by providing services and products. I have also gained knowledge about the issues that often accompany program development and program evaluation. These issues include effectively using evidence to design programs, the difficulty of implementing programs with fidelity, barriers to collecting data from program participants, and the challenges with using available but limited data to analyze program effectiveness.

When I started the SRCD Executive Branch Policy Fellowship, my primary goals were to learn as much as I could about the intersection of science and policy and become well-informed about the various careers in policy. As my fellowship experience draws to an end, I often reflect on these goals with a sense of accomplishment. I am amazed by how much I have learned over the past year as well as by how much more knowledgeable and competent I feel working at OPRE now that I am a second-year Fellow. My experience would not have been the same if it wasn't for all of the support I have received from SRCD, my colleagues at OPRE, and my network of other Fellows. I could never thank SRCD and OPRE enough for providing me with this opportunity to grow and mature, both professionally and personally