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June 2012 Spotlight on the SRCD Policy Fellow: Pamala Trivedi, Ph.D.

2011-2012 Federal Executive Branch Policy Fellow

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I am finishing up my SRCD Executive Branch Policy Fellowship in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' (HHS) Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (ASPE). I have been covering the early childhood portfolio at ASPE, which has included work in the areas of Head Start/Early Head Start (HS/EHS), child care, the Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting Program (MIECHV) funded through the Affordable Care Act, and Race to the Top — Early Learning Challenge (RTT-ELC), a competitive grants program jointly administered by HHS and the Department of Education. Our main role at ASPE is to serve as principal advisors to the HHS Secretary on policy development, legislation, and the budget process. Much of the work I have been involved with consists of collecting and integrating information across sources to summarize in written or verbal form for those in leadership positions who are either career civil servants or political appointees.

I am a school psychologist by training, and prior to my fellowship, I served as a clinician in a Head Start setting in DC for children and families experiencing homelessness. Doing this direct work with members of vulnerable populations has provided an interesting lens for thinking about the top-down reforms to the systems that serve low-income children and their families that are supported by the current administration. In fact, part of my motivation for wanting to do this fellowship was the sense of frustration I experienced as a clinician working with children subject to multiple vulnerabilities and feeling like our service delivery systems need to be much more responsive to the evolving situations of families experiencing poverty who also have unmet health and mental health needs. Applying these concerns to federal policy has been challenging, though I am fortunate to be involved in government at a time when deep changes are being considered and implemented, such as the recent efforts to improve quality and program integrity in Head Start/Early Head Start by—for the first time—instituting re-competition. Thinking about programmatic service delivery more broadly has also involved branching out into methods that I have not always felt comfortable with. Trained as a clinician and ethnographer, this year, I have had to think through the ways quantitative methods that enable the examination of population-level changes over time are necessary for evaluating how federally administered programs can evolve to meet the needs of a changing population. An analysis that I collaborated on with a colleague from our data division about the changing face of poverty in Head Start will be presented at the annual Head Start Research Conference. In addition to work with different data sets, I have also continued to think about the ways the voices of children and families that I had attended to so closely in other work can have an impact on federal policy.

An important area for learning during my fellowship experience has been thinking about the ways science informs policy, and early childhood has proved an interesting area for consideration of this nexus. We now have many years of research supporting the science of early childhood development, including the long term, adverse health consequences of toxic stress that can be experienced very early, particularly by children and families from vulnerable populations. I have been impressed by how carefully federal policy makers consider this research, including drawing directly on the expertise of child development researchers, economists, and state administrators who have extensive experience working with young children and their families and have made significant contributions to our understanding of human development, children's social, cultural, and economic contexts, and service utilization. When thinking about policy in the broadest terms, I have appreciated how conscientiously my new mentors have framed the need to improve quality in early care and education settings in order to buffer, rather than contribute to the volatility, insecurity, and inequality experienced by families with young children who are living in poverty.

I am deeply grateful to SRCD for providing me with this fellowship opportunity. The work at ASPE continues to stretch my thinking through connections with federal staff with very different training and experiences from their work in states, at foundations, and in different parts of the academy.