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August 2010 Spotlight on the SRCD Policy Fellow: Melinda Leidy, Ph.D.

2009-2010 Federal Congressional Policy Fellow

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The past year working for Senator Christopher Dodd in the Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Subcommittee on Children and Families has been an invaluable learning experience for me. Working for the subcommittee gave me a unique opportunity to learn about committee work, while also learning about the workings of a personal office. Senator Dodd does not have personal office staff that handles the issues that the subcommittee works on, and thus, we are his staff on issues related to children, families, education, and healthcare. I have participated in many aspects of the legislative process and have learned from a team of very intelligent, motivated, and hard-working individuals. The fellowship started off slowly for me. Healthcare reform was dominating much of the time and energy on the hill. Thus, I used this time to learn about the senate processes and procedures, attend briefings on topics that interested me, read research reports, and start working on a few smaller projects. Everyone told me the pace would pick up and after the holidays, I became very busy.

In March the Obama Administration and the Department of Education released their Blueprint for Reform and charged Congress with the reauthorization of No Child Left Behind, formerly known as the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. I have been very fortunate to be a part of this education reauthorization process. This included attending briefings by the Administration and the Department of Education to hear about their priorities and vision for education reform. I also participated in full committee discussions, smaller working groups, and bipartisan negotiations. As part of this reauthorization process, the Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee held ten hearings that I helped prepare for and staffed Senator Dodd at. This was an opportunity for the committee to hear from experts in the field on a variety of topics related to education reform, ranging from teacher and principals to meeting the needs of special populations. As the process continued, I met with numerous advocates, constituents, and organizations to discuss their views on education reform. I worked very closely with Senator Dodd's education staffer to focus on his priorities and ensure that we advocate for those priorities during negotiations, while also working hard to write the best possible bill to improve our education system. While I will not be here to see the outcome of this reauthorization, I have learned so much from my experiences and will be eager to see what happens in the coming months.

In addition to education reauthorization, I also worked on reintroducing several smaller bills related to children and families. This included meeting with organizations/constituent groups on changes and new ideas for the bill, and working with legislative counsel to revise the bill. I also wrote one page overviews on the bill, floor statements, and helped gather co-sponsors. Throughout the year, our subcommittee also held several hearings. In the fall we had a hearing on H1N1 and the importance of paid sick leave and this spring we started a series of hearings on the State of the American Child. The goal of these hearings is to examine how our nation's children are doing, what federal and state programs are doing to help children, and what currently needs to be done to help improve the lives of our children. My role included writing witness questions, gathering background research, and helping with the memo for Senator Dodd. I have learned a lot from our witnesses and have thoroughly enjoyed being a part of these hearings.

As my fellowship comes to an end, I feel very fortunate to have been able to work in the Senate and be a part of the hard-working team dedicated to improving the lives of children and families. I leave Capitol Hill with a deeper understanding of our legislative process and profound respect for our country's leaders and their staff.