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March 2010 Spotlight on the SRCD Policy Fellow: Sacha Klein, M.S.W., Ph.D.

2009-2010 Federal Executive Branch Policy Fellow

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It is only seven months into my fellowship year, but I am fortunate to have already enjoyed a number of wonderful opportunities that are deepening my understanding of how developmental research informs public policy and vice versa. As an Executive Branch Fellow in HHS' Administration for Children and Families, I have a joint placement in the Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation (OPRE) and the Children's Bureau's Office of Child Abuse and Neglect (OCAN) where I am currently working on several exciting early childhood and child welfare projects and initiatives. These include: (1) implementation of the new federal home visiting program embedded in health care reform; (2) coordination of a workgroup focused on promoting partnerships between Early Head Start/Head Start and child welfare service agencies; and (3) serving as a research and evaluation 'consultant' to the Children's Bureau's Supporting Evidencebased Home Visiting Programs to Prevent Child Abuse and Neglect discretionary grant program.

Federal Home Visiting Program. When I began my fellowship year, OPRE was in the process of preparing for the possibility of a new federal early childhood home visitation program. President Obama's FY10 budget included a proposal for establishing a mandatory formula grant program to support states in the provision of evidence-based home visitation services for low-income families, and this proposal was embedded in the health care reform legislation. Shortly after starting my fellowship, I was given the exciting opportunity to be part of a small HHS team that, in anticipation of this new program, was charged with developing evidence review criteria for determining which home visiting approaches will qualify as 'evidence-based' and would thus be eligible for maximum funding under the new program. As a social scientist, I was excited and encouraged by the Obama Administration's commitment to prioritizing public funding for proven home visiting programs. However, working on this project has also given me an appreciation for just how complex and challenging it can be to operationalize the concept of 'evidence-based'. I understand now how dependent such efforts are on the quantity and quality of existing research, and I also have a greater appreciation for how high stakes these 'evidence-based' determinations can be for social programs. I will carry this experience with me when I return to academia later this year, both as a reminder of the potential, positive influence of social science but also as a sober reminder of researchers' responsibility to produce the most rigorous and credible scholarship possible.

Head Start-Child Welfare Partnerships Workgroup. A portion of my time this year has also been spent leading a workgroup of staff from the Office of Head Start and the Children's Bureau who are committed to promoting effective partnerships between local Early Head Start/Head Start (EHS/HS) agencies and child welfare service agencies. The mission of this group is to increase the number of foster children who benefit from the comprehensive developmental services and supports available through EHS/HS programs. To achieve this goal, the group is working to build on and disseminate the results of an evaluation study of the 2002-2007 Early Head Start-Child Welfare Services initiative, which funded 24 EHS agencies around the country to experiment with promising approaches to serving families involved in the child welfare system. So far this year, we have drafted an Information Memorandum to provide guidance and practical strategies to local EHS/HS agencies concerning how to partner with local child welfare agencies and how to serve foster children. The workgroup also has presented a plenary session on this topic at each of the Early Head Start Orientation Meetings held in Washington, DC, this Winter, allowing us to reach approximately 600 new and returning EHS grantees with this message. Currently, I am working with a Head Start Fellow and other members of the group to develop a research brief (modeled after the SRCD Social Policy Report Briefs) that summarizes findings from the Early Head StartChild Welfare Services evaluation in a practitioner-friendly format. We are also developing a partnership tool kit to distribute to EHS/HS and child welfare agencies that

includes items such as a sample foster child referral form for child welfare agency staff, a template letter to foster parents encouraging them to enroll children in EHS/HS, and a suggested topic list for joint EHS/HS and child welfare staff trainings. My work with this group has been extremely rewarding, in part because my own scholarship focuses on the potential of high-quality early care and education programs to reduce child maltreatment, but also because this workgroup serves as a clear example of the power of research—in this case a single program evaluation report—to improve federal policy and practice on behalf of vulnerable children.

Supporting Evidence-based Home Visiting Programs to Prevent Child Abuse and Neglect Program. Finally, I have also spent time this year acting as a research and evaluation 'consultant' to the Children's Bureau's Supporting Evidence-based Home Visiting Programs to Prevent Child Abuse and Neglect (EBHV) program. The EBHV project funds 17 discretionary grants that are focused on developing the necessary infrastructure to support effective implementation and/or scaling up of evidence-based home visitation programs, as well as a cross-site evaluation. In some ways, the EBHV program can be seen as a precursor to the new federal early childhood home visitation program. My experience with EBHV this year has been both instructive and also sobering as shortly before the new year we learned that Congress chose not to appropriate funds to continue to pay for EBHV in FY11. While this news was extremely disappointing, I have been inspired by the commitment of ACF staff, the EBHV grantees, and the EBHV cross-site evaluation contractors to salvage as much of the program and evaluation as possible. One of my teaching interests as a social work professor is policy advocacy, and so one lesson that I will carry forward from this experience has to do with the ways in which EBHV grantees have engaged, sometimes successfully and sometimes not, in independent and collective action to advocate for funding restoration and local funding supplementation. I am reminded by EBHV of the importance of educating and equipping social service professionals with the skills they need to successfully advocate for program resources. As Sister Irene Kraus of the Daughters of Charity once said: 'No margin, no mission'.

Overall, I feel very lucky to be at ACF, especially during such an exciting transitional year in government. As I prepare to start a faculty position at Michigan State University School of Social Work in the fall, I have no doubt that my experience as an SRCD Fellow is shaping me in ways that will ultimately make me both a better researcher and a more effective teacher.