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# December 2007 Spotlight on the SRCD Policy Fellow: Dara Blachman, Ph.D.

2006-2007 Federal Executive Branch Policy Fellow

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I am currently in my second year of an Executive Branch fellowship at the Office of Behavioral and Social Sciences Research (OBSSR), which is housed in the Office of the Director at the National Institutes of Health. OBSSR serves as the NIH focal point for research on behavioral, social, and lifestyle factors in the causation, treatment, and prevention of diseases, and works to promote and enhance behavioral and social sciences research across all of NIH.

Given OBSSR's broad mandate and scope, my fellowship has afforded me the opportunity to work with scientific and health professionals from diverse perspectives and backgrounds. I have actively sought out involvement with a number of inter-agency projects, including serving on the planning committee for several workshops and conferences. Specifically, I recently assisted with a FDA-led workshop on *Adolescent Over-the-Counter Drug Product Use* and a workshop on *Teen Dating Violence: Developing a Research Agenda to Meet Practice Needs* sponsored by a number of federal agencies including HHS, Department of Justice,

USDA, and the Departments of Defense and Education. Through these experiences, I have obtained a greater appreciation for the complexity involved in bringing together multiple stakeholders from the research, practice, policy, regulatory, and business communities. Recognizing the unique perspectives, agendas and needs of each stakeholder while trying to find creative ways to work together towards understanding and solving a specific problem can be quite challenging and frustrating at times. Yet, throughout these processes, I have been heartened by the genuine desire of individuals and groups to reach across these boundaries and move forward in collaborative ways. Identifying the ultimate common goal of better serving youth and their families often paves the way for the development of creative solutions which can both move research forward but also serve pressing practice and policy needs.

My placement at OBSSR has also allowed me to obtain a unique perspective on the role that behavioral and social sciences play in the larger scientific and public health arenas, along with the politicized context in which they operate. For example, OBSSR was recently called upon to work on a congressional request to NIH's Office of Portfolio Analysis and Strategic Initiatives (OPASI) for the development a strategic plan for basic Behavioral and Social Science Research (bBSSR) across NIH. I, along with my entire office, have been actively involved in this process through requesting and summarizing information from the scientific, health professional, and advocacy communities, soliciting and reviewing input from NIH institutes and centers, completing a portfolio analysis, and identifying gaps within the bBSSR portfolio. My participation in this process has provided me with a fascinating window and unique insights into the intricate and delicate relationship between politics, advocacy, and science.

As I continue my final fellowship year, I look forward to ongoing experiences that allow me to further my appreciation of the multi-faceted interactions between the scientific community, practitioners, policy makers, federal agencies, and advocacy groups. The ultimate challenge remains for us to bridge the gap between research, practice, and policy so that children and families can truly benefit from current scientific knowledge and advances. This goal can only be realized through genuine collaboration and innovation among stakeholders. The skills, experiences, and perspectives which I have obtained through this fellowship will allow me to continue to work at the forefront of this challenge in order to ultimately have a positive impact on the lives of our nation's children and families.