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

2006-2007 Federal Executive Branch Policy Fellow

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I am nearing the end of my first year as an Executive Branch fellow 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. The mission of OBSSR is to stimulate and integrate behavioral and social science research within the NIH health research enterprise in order to ultimately improve our understanding, treatment and prevention of disease. Thus, a placement in this office has afforded me the unique position of working in a setting in which developmental science is only one of many areas of focus. From this broad vantage point, I have been able to experience firsthand the process of considering the state of a given field of research, exploring where the science has the potential to move, and designing an agenda to encourage and stimulate work in that direction.

In this vein, much of my time thus far has focused on two “cross cutting” areas of science which OBSSR seeks to stimulate and support: dissemination/implementation research and health disparities. Firstly, I am

coordinating an upcoming trans-NIH workshop focusing on the state of the science in the area of dissemination and implementation. This conference follows from much discussion about the "gap" between science and practice by asserting that the process of dissemination and implementation is actually something that can be studied as a scientific undertaking while at the same time working to improve service delivery and ultimately public health. One goal of this conference is to bring together researchers from a variety of fields (including children's services) who are engaging in this type of work but who may not communicate with each other in order to develop a more cohesive community of researchers and move the field forward.

I have also been involved in the writing and subsequent issuing of a funding opportunity announcement (FOA) in the area of health disparities research. This experience has allowed me to follow the process of setting research priorities for a field from concept development, to refinement through the writing process, and, over the next year, through the review process and ultimate funding of applications.

In addition to these specific projects, my placement at OBBSR has increased my appreciation of the role of the behavioral and social sciences on the national scientific stage. I am learning how efforts to support, stimulate, and integrate these sciences into the nation's scientific and public health enterprises are influenced not only by the science itself but by the highly charged policy and political contexts in which the science operates.

Through experiences such as observing the grant review process; serving on inter-agency task forces; and observing the complex interactions between the scientific community, Congress, federal funding agencies, and advocacy groups, this fellowship has afforded me a host of unique opportunities. I am not sure where my career path will take me, but I am confident that the perspective, experiences, and skills which I am developing over the course of this fellowship will allow me to continue to work in the service of children and families at the interface of science, policy, and practice.