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September 2007 Spotlight on the SRCD Policy Fellow: Jill Antonishak, Ph.D.

2006-2007 Federal Congressional Policy Fellow

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As a graduate student at University of Virginia, I developed a course for undergraduates on Developmental Psychology and Public Policy. We covered a wide range of topics, including child abuse and neglect, adolescent pregnancy, maternal and child health, early childhood education, economic policies affecting families, and mental health needs of the elderly. A consistent theme in our discussion was the difference between policymakers and researchers in orientation, goals, and constituencies, and the subsequent disconnect between policy and research. Seeing these differences first-hand during the Fellowship year was an amazing opportunity.

I spent my fellowship year in the office of Senator Tom Harkin. I worked on a range of legislative issues, including substance abuse prevention and treatment, veterans' healthcare, child care issues, mental health parity, and SAMSHA reauthorization. One of the highlights of the year was working on a veteran suicide prevention bill and an amendment to the National Defense Authorization Act to support children and families of deployed military personnel—both of which passed in the Senate and are on their way to

becoming law.

As a community and developmental psychologist, my research was broadly focused on the influence of social-contextual factors on adolescent development and psychological adjustment. My developmental background was helpful in bringing research and science to the development of legislation, but actually moving legislation requires different skills. Gauging political climate and receptiveness, negotiating disparate goals and views, and navigating the politics of an issue are significant challenges. While there are often factors that trump the science, the availability of quality and accessible research is invaluable to support the legislation.

I recently accepted an offer to remain in Senator Harkin's office as a legislative assistant. My Congressional Fellowship provided an amazing opportunity to transition into the policy world. I look forward to continuing to bring developmental science to the policymaking process. As a participant in the policy-making process, I have recognized the critical need to disseminate information so that research is available and accessible. My experiences have reinforced that the integration of science, policy, and practice can most effectively strengthen policy and encourage healthy child development.