



Executive Summary

Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Health Policy Fellows

The *Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Health Policy Fellows* program is the second-oldest and the second longest-running program of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF). *Health Policy Fellows* was created in March 1973, and is now in its 39th year of operation.

Each year, the program brings to Washington six mid-career health professionals and behavioral and social scientists from community and academic settings to take part in and better understand the health policy process at the federal level—in order to help them become the next leaders in health policy.

Thus, the program supports the increasingly important role that administrators of health care organizations, private sector community-based providers, and others are playing in today's health care system.

Fellows actively contribute to the formulation of national health policies and accelerate their careers as leaders in health policy. *Health Policy Fellows* also aims to enrich the substance of the health policy debate at both the federal and state levels.

[Read the full Program Results Report.](#)
[Learn more on the program's website.](#)

CONTEXT

Health Policy Fellows is the second-oldest active RWJF program. RWJF staff members were motivated to start the program primarily by the perception that leading faculty in academic health centers were frequently tapped for senior health policy positions in the federal government, but were ill-prepared to assume those roles because they had had little understanding of the major issues in health policy or how policy was established.

RWJF officers felt that an intensive exposure to government earlier in their careers would add enormously to their later effectiveness if they moved into governmental jobs. Over time the program has expanded to include not only academicians but mid-career health professionals and others from community settings.

KEY RESULTS

As of December 2011, 237 fellows (12 now deceased) from more than 119 academic health centers, community clinics, and other health care and public health organizations have participated in the program. RWJF has awarded more than \$31.5 million in support of the program. The Board of Trustees has authorized up to an additional \$11.88 million through August 2012.

The program's [website](#) contains an alumni directory, profiles of current fellows, and spotlights on alumni.

THE PROGRAM AND THE FELLOWS

Each September, a cohort of fellows (six in recent years; between six and 10 prior to 2009) arrives in Washington and begins a 12-week orientation period organized by the national program office. Fellows are introduced to key officials and staff from the legislative and executive branches as well as think tanks, advocacy organizations, and professional and trade associations. They learn about governmental procedures and policy-making from a variety of perspectives.

At the end of the orientation period, fellows seek work placements within a congressional office (both house and senate), a federal agency, or a division in the legislative or executive branch, where they work from January through August (although some have stayed longer).

Throughout the program's history, most fellows have chosen to work in a congressional office—the majority in the Senate and a smaller number in the House of Representatives. Since 2009, however, the distribution of placements among the Senate and the House has evened out, and placements within the executive branch have increased.

During their assignments, most fellows become full-fledged staff members who draft legislation, perform background research, organize and staff hearings, brief members of Congress on particular issues prior to committee and floor votes, respond to constituents' requests, and represent their offices at conferences.

Most fellows return to their home institutions after leaving Washington, using the experience to play a more active role in health policy-related activities and to take on leadership responsibilities. Others decide to move into health policy full time, either at

the state level or accepting positions with Washington organizations such as the Institute of Medicine (IOM), the National Institutes of Health, foundations, or consulting groups. See the program's website for [video profiles](#) of several fellows and alumni.

EVALUATIONS

The program's most recent evaluation was in 2006. Previous evaluations occurred in 1980, 1992, and 1999. These assessments all shared the main finding that *Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Health Policy Fellows* has been successful in providing mid-career professionals with an intense exposure to the federal policy process. In the most recent evaluation report, fellows described their experience as "life-changing" and transformational.

At the same time, the evaluations have made recommendations for changes to the program many of which have been incorporated as the program has evolved.

CHANGES TO THE PROGRAM

Starting in fall 2002, additional financial and other resources have been provided to the fellows to enable continued leadership development in Washington after the traditional one-year assignment. It is based on each fellow's plan, submitted to RWJF, that describes how they will continue to develop their policy expertise and leadership after their Washington assignment ends—whether they intend to return to their home institution, make a transition into a new position, or extend the Washington assignment through the end of the congressional session.

Also, since fall 2003 the program has actively encouraged applications from the public health, behavioral health, and social science fields.

In addition, the program developed two applicant tracks, which were first implemented with the 2009–10 cohort:

- *Track One, traditional, with a sponsoring institution.* With this track, there is an expectation on the part of the program, the sponsoring institution, and the fellow that the fellow will return to the sponsoring institution after the fellowship.
- *Track Two, a new option, without a sponsoring institution.* Many fellows may not have strong links to a sponsoring institution or are unclear about their plans to return. In the past, with only the one track, they had to commit to returning, but many times their experience in the program caused them to change their minds, and they did not end up returning. This track removes any perceived obligation to return to their prior position.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PROGRAM

The 2006 evaluation found that recent alumni “consistently rated the fellowship experience extremely positively with fellows describing it in terms such as a 'life-changing' or 'transformational' experience. They clearly enjoyed the chance to make a difference, to gain experience with and knowledge of the policy world, and to interact with policymakers.... Many reported that they use the skills they developed on a daily basis, and say that they would not have their current jobs without the fellowship experience.”

CHALLENGES FOR THE FUTURE

The program’s director and RWJF program officer note the following continuing challenges:

- Increasing diversity both in the professions of the fellows and racial and ethnic diversity in the application pool and ultimately in the class itself
- Increasing the number of applications and remove perceived barriers to the application process, which they believe the two-track option is beginning to address
- Remaining aware of the preferences and needs of its many constituencies including the IOM, RWJF, the program’s advisory board, current and past fellows, the Washington offices that accept fellows, and the fellows' sponsoring institutions
- Maintaining its clarity of purpose and its long-standing prestige as it has broadened its scope from accepting only clinician-researchers from some of the nation's most prestigious academic health centers, to include applicants from community-based health professionals as well as those from behavioral health and social science fields
- Helping fellows of all types with reentry to their careers and their home institutions. Many fellows find reentry challenging and do not always believe that their new skills and perspectives are fully appreciated.

Program Management

National program office: Institute of Medicine at the National Academies

Program director: Marie E. Michnich
