As the 2009-2010 Lister Hill Policy Fellow, I worked in the RAND Gulf States Policy Institute (GSPI) in New Orleans, LA. The RAND Corporation is a nonprofit institution that improves policy and decision making through research and analysis. In 2005 the RAND Gulf States Policy Institute was established as a collaboration of the RAND Corporation and seven Gulf States universities to support hurricane recovery and long-term economic development in Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama. Hurricanes Katrina and Rita exacerbated the region's social and economic problems, and the region continues to suffer from poor schools, little economic opportunity, insufficient social services, and a dearth of cross-racial leadership.

Today, the GSPI provides objective analysis to federal, state, and local leaders in support of evidence-based policymaking and the well-being of individuals throughout the Gulf States region. In addition to the GSPI, RAND has four additional US offices located in Arlington, VA, Santa Monica, CA, and Pittsburg, PA. RAND utilizes a variety of technologies and communication tools to allow researchers and research staff located in different offices to work together, bringing together a variety of expertise to solve challenging research questions. Dr. Anita Chandra, a behavioral scientist located in the Arlington, served as my mentor. Dr. Chandra is well-published behavioral scientist, experienced in conducting research on a variety of health areas, including community-based participatory research and evaluation, mental health, public health systems, and disaster preparedness.

During my six months at RAND, I contributed to a number of small projects specific to the promotion of the GSPI in the region, but the majority of my time was spent on two major projects, an assessment of the health data available in the greater New Orleans area and a review of the literature pertaining to a definition and indicators of community resilience. The purpose of the health data assessment was to identify what data is being collected, is or is not available, and in what health areas data is lacking. Mapping the assessable data related to psychological and physical health, access to healthcare, and the overall healthcare system of greater New Orleans was the first step to formulating a long-term research plan for the Gulf States Policy Institute. The assessment of health data in the greater New Orleans area was organized into a paper, which is currently being considered for RAND publication.
The second project to which I contributed was a literature review of grey and peer-reviewed publications pertaining to an operational definition and/or indicators of community resilience. Community resilience is a burgeoning concept in the community preparedness and response field. In the past, resilience has primarily been discussed in terms of individual or family response to trauma or violence from a psychological perspective. However, in recent years, two significant government documents, the Homeland Security Presidential Directive 21 and the National Health Security Strategy, have drawn attention to the concept of community resilience in terms of disaster preparedness and response. In other words, the Department of Health and Human Services is interested in identifying factors of community resilience and improving or enhancing those factors so that after a disaster, a community will be better able to adapt, recover, and return to normalcy as quickly as possible.

The Department of Health and Human Services asked RAND to assist in conducting this research. The first step in this lengthy research project was to conduct a systematic review of the available community resilience literature and organize that information into a publishable document. With guidance and input from Dr. Chandra and Dr. Lisa Meredith, I developed the search plan and the 2-tier data abstraction forms. My initial search resulted in more than 450 articles. After further analysis, I narrowed the number of articles to be included in the review down to 86. The final product, “Understanding Community Resilience in the Context of National Health Security: a Literature Review” can be found at the following website:
http://www.rand.org/pubs/working_papers/WR737/.

I would like to thank the Lister Hill Policy Center for this incredible learning experience which has provided me with an understanding of the health policy landscape, an appreciation for the policy making process, and a skillset for applying disaster preparedness policy at my current position at the Texas Department of State Health Services. I would also like to thank the RAND Corporation for generously opening their doors and allowing me to complete my fellowship in their establishment. I would also like to thank Dr. Mellissa Flournoy, Dr. Sally Sleeper and the entire GSPI staff for their kindness and support (and the opportunity to see President Obama at the New Orleans town hall meeting), and I would especially like to thank Dr. Anita Chandra for her gracious mentorship.