Yes, great morning!! And let me add my welcome to what promises to be another highly informative, provocative, evocative two days of sharing and then acting on behalf and with fathers, children, families, and communities everywhere, especially here in Pennsylvania!

I must confess that out of all of the keynotes presentations that I have had the opportunity to give for many years, this invitation by the Symposium Organizing Committee was the most daunting for me…Not only was I invited to speak to why I believe, why I know that the full acceptance of the care of their children is a social justice issue for them and for us, but I was asked to do so in 15 minutes! In short, the blessing and burden of knowing the Chair of the Strong Families Commission, Rufus Sylvester Lynch, is that the same incredibly high expectations that he sets for himself, he also sets for others—the people and the issues for whom he deeply cares!

To prepare for our time together, I re-read the report from the initial statewide symposium last September, with special attention paid to the notable list of continued barriers to fathers “involvement” within our ‘systems of care’ and the resultant recommendations on the necessary actions to be undertaken by many, including all 3 of our legislative branches, as well as our state departments and bureaus.

During my time with you this morning, I invite you to look at what must happen before any unjust barriers have even a modicum of hope of being brought down; joining me in exploring what is essential to acknowledge in order to secure the practices and policies that will ensure, as Pennsylvania Supreme Court Justice Max Baer says that “Fathers have the same responsibilities and, importantly the same rights as mothers”.

In the now next 13 minutes, I am going to argue that actually living Justice Baer’s words requires actions to be taken by these fathers and concurrently undertaken by all, in order to eradicate the unjust systematic barriers and generate genuine well-being for these men, their and our children, and communities here and across our country. Yes, social justice for us all!

The truth is that this injustice has its roots going back hundreds of years and even centuries… The realities of oppression, inequalities, and inequities reflected in today’s interpersonal and social phenomena are historical as well as all here know. Accordingly, colleagues Joshua Miller and Ann Marie Gurran (Racism in the United State, 2017, p.77) have eloquently said in referring to one of our ‘isms’ that “…the web of institutional racism…has a legacy of generations of outright oppression, systematic exclusion, and loss of opportunity”.

I confess that it was very hard for me to not just look at this issue of father’s rights as yet another manifestation of flagrant racism…
It is especially not to …of race when study after study report that children of color continue to be disproportionately of over-represented in our child welfare system and when on average these children stay in foster care longer that Caucasian children. However, findings also show that all children were united with birth families more often and had shorter stays in foster care when fathers were “adequately involved”, or had engaged in what the literature describes as “generative activities with children”. (eg., Hawkins & Palkovitz, 1999).

These are 2 terms used to denote a father`s active participation in the lives of their children, including perhaps, yet definitely going beyond, giving a birthday present.

And as if that wasn`t t enough, years ago I heard stories of the controversy surrounding the 1965 book by the sociologist then serving as President Lyndon Baines Johnson’s Assistant Secretary of Labor, Daniel Patrick Moynihan The Negro Family: The Case for National Action. This report-turned-book focused on the roots of poverty within the Negro community in the United States and, among other conclusions, stated “Post the civil rights act of 1964… Negros will expect, in the near, future equal opportunities… This is not going to happen”. He cites two reasons as to why not: the first he calls “the racist virus” and the second what he describes as the “toll” that the “unimaginable mistreatment has had on the Negro people”.

While we could all see and even agree with those statements (actually the link between slavery, poverty, and racism was made in the 1930`s by African American sociologist E. Franklin Frazier), Moynihan adds “The fundamental problem is that of the family structure”, adding that “The rise in black single mother-led families was caused by this “ghetto culture”, which in turn “…weakened the ability of Negro men function as authority figures.” (pg. 3). Martin Luther King Jr, and others found these comments damaging for the Negro people.

Nonetheless, in many ways Moynihan`s theme was echoed decades later in Bill Moyers` CBS report titled “The Vanishing Family: Crisis in Black America” which aired in 1986.

While the Moyers` report doesn`t mention its predecessor, Moyers was press secretary for President Johnson when the Moynihan report was issued.

And while many say that Moyer`s report showed no racial stereotypes, though interviews of Black families in Newark NJ, we hear the voices of many unmarried mothers and remember the fathers interviewed too. The one I remember best was then 26 years of age, Timothy McSeed.

Timothy had fathered six children by fours different women and he financially supported none of them. He spoke about having another child as if he were proof of his manhood, what some would describe as a notch on his belt…his ticket of entry. Timothy quoted the then even well-known saying “Mama`s baby, Papa`s maybe” and talked about wanting to support his children but then says he can`t because “You can`t give something that you don`t have. In order to give, you got to have for yourself.”

Fast forward to 2016 and the creation of our Social Justice Initiative. McSeed`s words and my own life experiences come crashing together: To be able to give anything, you first have to have it!
Take that fact and the reality of the now known intergenerational nature of trauma and the resultant life styles, including babies giving birth to babies, young men still seeming to express their manhood through the number of children they fathered and sons following in their footsteps...to prison...And you wonder what it is that needs to be ‘had’ for everyone to live Lives that are truly fulfilling. Lives wherein their Life experiences reflect that they are valuable...able to be valued.

In other words, how do we create a truly just society for all, including fathers who want health generative relationship with their children? What are even 3 of the critical components of such a relationship? And where do we start?

In Timothy’s own words are answered of where to begin: With the fathers themselves.

Our Social Justice Initiative believes that there are several levers that once pulled have the power to transform individuals, families, and their organizations and communities. And just as today we are constantly being reminded that ‘Fear’ and ‘Othering’ are contagious, so can be acts of social justice. Because of love, today we will look at 3 of the powers of Social Justice for transformative healing: Forgiveness, Courage and Compassion, Cultural Humility, and Radical Love. Let me take a few moments to tell you what we mean by each of these.

#1-Forgiveness. When fathers forgive themselves for not having been able to have lined-up to todays culture-wide portrayal of ‘fatherhood’ and seek interactions with their children wherein the father becomes a ‘daddy’, a huge step is taken forward. In addition to carrying around less toxicity that tragically can show-up in multiple other ways, we now know from the neuroscience of MRIs that parts of our brains are activated when we forgive and when we ourselves are forgiven, if only by ourselves. Imagine the positive impact on our systems of support if they too operated from places of forgiveness?!

Not by ‘blaming and shaming’ or even ‘excusing’, three different ways that our well-intended policies and even some of our most caring programs have used in looking at individuals and societal issues. (And yes, looking at what has contributed to or even directly led to a articular situation is not ‘excusing’, it’s looking at the honest connection between what ‘was’ and what ‘is’.)

Archbishop Desmond Tutu outlines a four step process, that he calls, the “fourfold path in the forgiveness cycle” (2014)

It begins with you telling your story, then naming the hurt you committed, then moves to recognizing our shared humanity or granting forgiveness. The fourth and final step in his process is renewing or even releasing or ending the relationship.

Smart and most effective local and federal organizations and systems could choose to operate this way and genuine child-centric policies could be constructed guided by the power of, and with, forgiveness.

#2- Courage and compassion. We connect courage and compassion because they each work best with each other; they balance one another; they balance one another. When men demonstrate the courage to risk being a genuine Dad, and maintaining compassion for themselves and messing
this up sometimes, mothers are also more likely to have the courage to forgive past acts.

With this in-place, families can become healthier and more child-focused, with less precious time and energy invested in taking actions to stay apart. Additionally, through courage and compassion our systems are able to make purposeful, definite, and strategic decisions while at the same time respecting the joys and struggles of these men and their families, appreciating the "bigger picture" in which they, and we, all live.

As if these results weren't enough to urge us to move forward with courage and compassion, there's yet another factoid to remember: the union of courage and compassion fortifies everyone. As neurology and biology professor Robert Sapolsky wonderfully wrote about two and a half decades ago, (1994, in Why Zebras don't get Ulcers), through courageous and compassionate acts this fortification moderates the effects of stressors that almost always emerge as harmful to everyone's health and well-being.

#3- Lastly, is the power of what we are calling radical love. Martin Luther King, Jr., Mahatma Gandhi to name just two of most everyone's heroes, call this 'agape love'.

This type of love is stronger than the love between two adults and even stronger then the love a parent has for a child. Radical love is to love for another simply because that person exists. It isn't about who that person is or what that person does or who and what that person knows. Radical love is a transcendent Love for all, again simply because they exist.

We can easily imagine what self-love can lead to... and that's not to be mistaken with narcissism that we continue to hear and read about... That is about an inflated sense of self-importance.

When radical love is united with forgiveness, limitations are clearly known.
Yet so are the elements of 'goodness'.

Just as I said earlier that 'Fear' in 'Othering' are contagious, so can be radical love.

Emotionally healthy little children and even animals recognize the type of love unless wounded earlier and/or taught that this feeling is taboo (as in the case of some of our male children who are still not allowed to express those feelings), when we are unwounded, most of us can receive this type of love and even risk responding in kind!

In the 2013 book Doing the Best I can: Fatherhood in the Inner City, Harvard sociologists Kathryn Edin and Timothy Nelson, spend several years living in a two-room apartment in Southern New Jersey and interview 110 mostly unmarried White and African-American fathers there and in Philadelphia. What they found is that while the relationships between the men, these "deadbeat dads", and the mothers of their children are far from steady, the bond between the father and his child is central to the man's life.

In fact, these fathers describe this relationship as so sensitive they insist that their role is to be there to “show love...and spend quality time.” (p.140). They differentiate between 'daddies and fathers'.

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(Allan Shedlin will soon talk about fatherhood and "daddying"). In short, these fathers-wanting-to-be Dads understand about the power of Love.

Now, imagine parents that may not live together yet act together, whole families that risk sharing this type of love and their communities? That would indeed make it radical! What would be the impact on them and their communities, if their organizations and the policies that govern them had this as part of their purpose, their mission... If these organizations in policies had radical love as an integral part of their service?

This is admittedly a different way to think about and begin to enact Social Justice. I urge you to keep this perspective in mind over the next two days of this precious time together.

Just as some have argued that ending slavery was not just a moral and ethical decision but also economic one... just like HIV/AIDS received major attention when it spread beyond a community of people and demographics... and just as we all had to live longer to be able to vote longer, spend money longer, in order for Elder Care to be taken seriously and supported by legislation... So can Movements like the one for father's being given the right and entrusted with the aligned responsibilities to be generatively engage with their children!

The strength that this movement can be stronger than the counter-movement that undoubtedly is to come. Our power is in our growing number of people locally, throughout our state, and country who understand that this campaign includes yet goes beyond ethical, moral, and even legal imperatives... Everyone knows that we are at a moment in time where the need has never been created for finding ways to make our communities safer and healthier for us all!

In closing, only through a framework that acknowledges and honors the pass, forgives ourselves and even some of our broken systems, and attends to the present with courage and compassion, can we help our fathers and families and their children understand the meaning of radical love for themselves and others. Only through genuine Social Justice can we understand father disengagement as a systematic issue that requires the dismantling of unjust structures and practices.

Only in doing so will we be able to together bring about the changes we all here today know we need to positively impact the future of our fathers, their families and communities, and the organizations and policies intended to best serve them all.

THANK-YOU and Enjoy the rest of this time together!