

## WHY EBP: ONE PERSON'S EXPERIENCE WITH PROBATION

### Meet Keisha Gaines

### *My Story*



When asked to share my experience, my first question was, "Why me?"

I have a criminal record ranging from forgery to aggravated assault. I have been on probation and parole in several counties and have a history of violations. I am not ashamed of my past, but that is only part of my story and who I am.

I grew up in West Philadelphia with my mother and siblings. I was raised by an abusive mother, and at around age 11, I was removed from the house and ended up living with my aunt. My aunt was incredibly influential on me and the person I wanted to be. I was now in a household where hygiene, love, respect, good grades, the importance of family, and God became my life.

Unfortunately, my aunt was unable to continue to care for me, and after three years, I found myself back in the child welfare system, bouncing between shelters, foster homes, and group homes. I was not liked, moved frequently, and learned to fight. At age 17, I found myself no longer in the system and homeless and quickly entered the criminal justice system.

Several years later, I was a single mother living with my two boys in squalor. We lived in an illegal rental with bed bugs and roaches. Each day was a struggle to ensure we had a roof over our heads and food on the table. During this period, I saw my probation officer, leaving my 8-year-old in charge of watching his younger siblings at McDonald's around the corner since children were not allowed in the office.

As I look back, I am so proud of who I am now and how I was able to overcome barriers with the guidance and support of some of my probation officers. There is one officer that I truly credit for me being alive today. I wanted to share some of the traits of the officers that made an impact on my life.

### People-Oriented

I remember doing an intake with an officer and answering the same questions I have answered so many times in the past. I am the first person to recognize that I had a serious attitude. I was fresh out of jail and not sure where I was sleeping the next day. I finally pushed back and told the officer that I was a "minute from being homeless."

To my surprise, the officer immediately stopped the intake and started to provide me with choices and possible options to assist me. She showed me at that moment that she was listening, genuinely caring, and flexible and that she was not just checking off the boxes. She was able to connect me to resources and prevent a crisis.



## Empathetic

“Tell me, what got you into the system?” It seems like such a simple question when I look back, but this officer was the first person who ever asked me to share the why. They gave me an opportunity to share my story. I was more than a number; they saw me as a person. They listened to me, showed compassion for my past, and took the time to learn about me as a person. They did not excuse my behaviors but helped me make connections and why mental health treatment was so important.

## Empowering

I have done many things wrong in my life and had my share of negative traits, but having someone who is able to help me find my own strengths and who believed that I could succeed was so powerful. They helped me remember and list the traits that I want my sons to have, the same traits that my aunt instilled in me) and provided me with the skills and resources to achieve my goals. Having an authentic person who wants you to succeed and that you do not want to let down helped me overcome the many obstacles I have overcome on my journey.

## Consistent

Supervision appropriately has clear rules. It is important that officers clearly communicate expectations. Some may appear to be “strict,” but it is important that there is a level of accountability while understanding that everyone’s situation is unique. One of my previous officers was “mean,” but I learned he had clear expectations. He had a heart and wanted me to be successful. He focused on what was important.

## Trust

When I look back at the officers who had the most influence on my life, the most important trait was that they were someone I could trust. Trust takes time to develop, but they were attentive during our appointments, honest, and straightforward. They say what they mean and consistently follow through with what they say they will do.

## Today

As I look back on my life, I now understand how probation officers can have a considerable impact on outcomes. I think back to how my life has drastically changed. I live in a stable residence in a good neighborhood with my sons. I completed my education, and I am excited about a book I have been writing. I continue to live a law-abiding life. I have my struggles, like everyone else, but now I have the resources, support, and mindset to be successful.

So why me? It is because I have a story to tell. I am a person who shows that the system, specifically probation officers, can help people make positive changes in their lives and that they can make a difference.