



Consumers Helping
Others Improve
Their Condition by
Ending Smoking

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Celebrating 20 Years of CHOICES: A Journey of Hope, Healing, and Peer Leadership

by Trish Dooley Budsock, Program Director

On Thursday, October 9th, we celebrated the **20th anniversary of the CHOICES program**. For two decades, CHOICES has brought tobacco education, compassion, and the message of tobacco recovery directly to people living with mental illness. What began as a bold idea shared by a small team has grown into a statewide movement rooted in dignity, empowerment, and the belief that tobacco recovery is possible for everyone.

Standing beside Dr. Jill Williams and Marie Verna, CHOICES Co-Founders and visionaries, I felt overwhelmed with gratitude. Since joining this program in 2010, I've had the privilege of witnessing what happens when people with lived experience lead the way. And our peer team—Deidre, Lisa, Terrance, Cleo, and Azeem—has shown me, time and time again, how powerful



Dr. Jill Williams, CHOICES co-founder

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NJ Quit Smoking Resources

by Deidre Stenard

In 2007, I quit smoking by going to a New Jersey Quit Center in New Brunswick called the Tobacco Dependence Program of New Brunswick. I went to their support group where I learned how to use Nicotine Replacement Therapy or NRT (patch, gum, lozenge, nasal spray) to quit. I had 8 quit attempts before I completely quit smoking. I have been off cigarettes for 18 years since then. Once I had been off cigarettes for a year, I started to work for CHOICES.

Several of our own team members at CHOICES have used New Jersey Quit Centers to help them quit smoking, actually using the same NJ Quit Center, although the name has changed a couple of times over the years. So, I hope you can see the importance of going to a NJ Quit Center when you would like to stop smoking.

There was one point in the 18 years that I've been completely off cigarettes that funding for the NJ Quit Centers dried up for a few years. The NJ Quit Centers had to cut back on staff or close completely because of it. Dedicated staff kept their centers open without pay, but obviously it was hard and services had to be curtailed. Once the NJ Quit Centers got funding again, they had a strong start. All the feedback I've received is that they are very helpful and even give out free Nicotine Replacement Therapy.

Besides the NJ Quit Centers, another resource for quitting smoking include The NJ Quitline 1-866-NJ-STOPS (1-866-657-8677). They are going strong with no sign that the budget cuts are going to affect them. There are also cuts to Medicaid and the Affordable Care Act, potentially impacting people who would otherwise be able to get Nicotine Replacement Therapy or

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News Year's Resolution

by Lisa Evans

Many of us make New Year's resolutions every year that we ultimately never accomplish. If we are smokers, we should try it again this year. Our goal for 2026 should be to cut down on the number of cigarettes we smoke each day. I did not say quit, I did not say go cold turkey, I did not say set a quit date, I did not tell you how many cigarettes to cut down. I'm just saying, you should cut down and do it for a very good reason.

Johns Hopkins Medicine released a study in November 2025, which added to existing evidence that smoking fewer cigarettes does not decrease the risk for cardiovascular disease. Past research has shown that even smoking one cigarette a day leaves the smoker vulnerable to heart-related illnesses. The Johns Hopkins study concludes that quitting tobacco is the most effective strategy for improving a smoker's cardiovascular health. Not everyone is ready to quit, can quit cold turkey, or has the confidence to quit. Even if you don't feel ready to stop completely, think about taking one small step forward and try to cut down.

Cutting down on smoking can set you on the path to quitting at a future date with readiness and confidence, two factors that support a successful quit. These same two factors are likely holding you back from quitting right now. That's because smokers have patterns that are difficult to break. Breaking patterns can be a really powerful step towards finally ending the addiction to cigarettes, because it's not just a physical habit; it's also psychological. As you decrease the number of cigarettes you smoke per day, you start breaking your patterns and feel more in control. The more in control you become, the less dependent you are on nicotine, which can make it easier to quit. Reducing smoking has health and financial benefits, but remember,

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CHOICES travels to the Twin Cities!

by Azeem Sitabkhan

For my article this December, I have decided to write about my and my supervisor's, Trish Dooley Budsock, CHOICES trip to Minnesota.

Trish asked me to join for this trip a couple months ago and I readily agreed. We would be delivering a day-long seminar on Tuesday, December 2nd to Peer Advocates in the Minnesota/North Dakota area, in order to help broaden their efforts in delivering peer based tobacco treatment to their clients. Also a second, shorter program would be held on Wednesday, December 3rd, in which Trish and I would share the space and time with other presenters. The CHOICES program is, and has been, a groundbreaking program, first envisioned by Dr. Jill Williams over 20 years ago. I have been part of the CHOICES program for about 8 years now, but the program itself has been operating for over 20 years (we recently had our 20th anniversary gala!). It has been groundbreaking in the sense that peers with mental health conditions have travelled the state of NJ presenting several times weekly to inform and educate fellow mental health clients on tobacco dependence and treatment. CHOICES has been a great success, assisting tens of thousands of consumers in their efforts to manage their tobacco addiction. Other states have taken notice.

Among these states are Minnesota and North Dakota, where we worked closely with the Lung Association in that region, specifically Pat and Reba. On this particular trip, Trish and I presented to various peer advocates in the mental health system of that region. We spoke about the history of tobacco use in this country and explained how tobacco use inordinately affects those with mental health conditions and substance use disorders. We also did a run through of our CHOICES presentation and went over the curriculum of our Learning About Healthy Living manual.

Ultimately, the goal of this trip was to create awareness and generate possible new strategies for incorporating more tobacco dependence peer treatment in the mental health and substance use communities in that region. And it was a great success! CHOICES has become a role model for programs in other states that would like to create more peer themed work.



Capitol building in St. Paul, MN.



Azeem delivering his presentation.

Consequences of Smoking Cigars

by Terrance H

I started smoking cigars when I was just 15 years old. At the time, it seemed harmless—almost like a game. But over the years, I learned the hard way that cigar smoking comes with serious consequences, some of which I never imagined when I first picked one up.



One of the biggest issues is the odor. Cigar smoke leaves a strong, lingering smell that clings to your clothes, your breath, and even your surroundings. I noticed that people—friends included—often kept their distance because of it. That odor alone can create barriers in relationships and social situations.

Another major consequence is tooth decay. I experienced this personally. Over time, nearly all my teeth deteriorated. It wasn't sudden—it happened slowly, quietly, and by the time I fully understood the damage, it was already done.

Then there's the issue most people don't talk about: carbon monoxide. Cigars produce significantly more CO than cigarettes—almost twice as much. I remember blowing into a CO monitor and seeing readings as high as 45 ppm after a cigar, compared to around 25 ppm after a cigarette. That's a powerful reminder of what you're putting into your body with each puff.

These are just a few of the consequences I've faced. I share this not to judge anyone, but to offer insight and hopefully give you something to think about. If my experience can help even one person reconsider or make a healthier choice, then telling my story is worth it.

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services through those benefits.

New Jersey residents have access to 11 Quit Centers across the state. With funding cuts on the national level impacting health programs and coverage, try to use these services while they remain available! Check out this website for additional information:

<https://www.nj.gov/health/fhs/tobacco/quitting/>

New Year's continued from page 2

it is not the end of your journey. It is just the beginning. Quitting is at the end.

One of the easiest ways to cut down is to give up one cigarette a day. Try giving up a mid-morning or mid-afternoon cigarette, try for several days, and see if you can maintain that level of smoking. You can remove another cigarette from the number you smoke daily as you become more confident. Technically, you will be going “cold turkey” for each cigarette not smoked.

Instead of “cold turkey”, try using Nicotine Replacement Therapy products (NRT), gum or lozenges in place of a cigarette. When you use these medications, you will enjoy your cigarettes less. If they are not as enjoyable, then that should help you smoke fewer cigarettes each day.

You may not succeed the first time you try to cut down, but you can keep trying as many times as you need to. You are just trying to cut down one cigarette a day, build your confidence, then try cutting another, and then another. Your journey may be short, it may get detoured, or it may be long, but you will reach the end. You will quit, just maybe not today. I wish a Happy New Year and much success with your resolution!

<https://www.news-medical.net/news/20251205/Smoking-fewer-cigarettes-does-not-eliminate-cardiovascular-disease-risk.aspx>
<https://healthy.kaiserpermanente.org/health-wellness/health-encyclopedia/he.smoking-fewer-cigarettes.aa153143>

Happy Holidays—make this the season you choose to quit

by Cleo Zifovski

During the Christmas season, we come together to enjoy each other's company before a new year begins. Although quitting smoking is challenging and often feels like something we should put off, the holidays may actually be one of the best times to stop. When we understand our own habits and motivations, we can create incentives and supports that make healthier choices easier. [2]

One helpful approach is the use of “quit-and-win” contests, which give smokers a reward for staying smoke-free. In one study, a holiday-themed quit-and-win challenge that offered a Christmas turkey as the prize helped both heavy and light smokers reduce their cigarette use and cravings.[1] This suggests that a simple Christmas-time challenge can encourage meaningful progress toward quitting.

If you're still unsure, there are many reasons why quitting smoking fits perfectly with the spirit of the holidays. You're surrounded by loved ones who can offer support. Family members who know you're trying to quit can give helpful gifts such as nicotine gum or patches, making cravings easier to manage. With all the holiday food around, you'll have plenty of satisfying snacks to reach for instead of a cigarette. Time off from work also means less stress, making it easier to focus on quitting. Stopping smoking is a gift to your family too, since both smoking and second-hand smoke can harm the people you love. The season's positive mood can help you stay motivated, and if others in your household smoke, you can try quitting together. You'll save money, improve your health, and start the new year on a stronger, healthier note. [3]

And even if Christmas doesn't go exactly as
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How to Celebrate the Holidays Smoke-Free!

by Deidre Stenard



With the holidays rapidly approaching consider using these tips to stay smoke-free:

Plan a Smoke-Free Outcome: Schedule activities and plan accordingly to avoid overwhelming situations. It's okay to limit the time that you'll be at a party, particularly if it's a trigger to smoke. Take breaks when needed to recharge your mind and body.

Minimize Triggers: Identify and avoid situations that may lead to smoking, such as stress or social gatherings. If stress, social gatherings and work are triggers to smoke, you can plan to set aside a time to deal with those things and relax the rest of the time smoke-free.

Consider using Nicotine Replacement Therapy (NRT): patch, gum, lozenge, or nasal spray can help manage withdrawal symptoms and reduce dependence. If you used smoking as a reward, now you can eat low calorie snacks such as celery and carrot sticks, sugar-free gum, or chew on a cinnamon stick as a reward. It's okay to reward yourself with healthy foods using the law of substitution when you are smoke-free.

Let people close to you know: Share your commitment to staying smoke-free with trusted individuals or use apps like the Kwit app from the App Store to track your progress. It's a good idea to let 4 or 5 people close to you know that you are staying smoke-free.

Stay Healthy: Prioritize your physical health with rest, hydration, and gentle exercise to manage stress and cravings. You can adopt a daily meditation practice that helps you stay peaceful and grounded. A team member of CHOICES swears by the benefits of meditation and goes to meditation retreats on a regular basis. <https://www.bing.com/search?>



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this work can be when delivered through the voice of someone who has *walked the walk*. Each of our advocates brings something extraordinary to CHOICES. Their stories of struggle, growth, and triumph are the heart-beat of this program. When they walk into a room, people listen—not because of data or credentials—but because they speak from lived truth. They change lives by modeling tobacco recovery in real time. Their courage is what CHOICES is all about.

This anniversary celebration was made even more meaningful by the presence of so many valued partners and leaders in our state. We were honored to be joined by:

- Renee Burawski, Assistant Commissioner- DMHAS
- Robert Eilers, Medical Director -DMHAS
- Robert Kley, Vice President and CEO -MHANJ
- Dr. Michele Pato, Director- Rutgers Center for Genomics of Psychiatric Health and Addiction
- Dr. Denise Hien, Helen E. Chaney Endowed Chair in Alcohol Studies and Distinguished Professor in the Graduate School of Applied and Professional Psychology (GSAPP) - Rutgers University
- Robert Budsock, President and CEO - Integrity House
- Tine Hansen-Turton, President and COO- Woods System of Care

And many other esteemed colleagues from Rutgers RWJMS and champions from New Jersey's behavioral health community.

Their support underscores the importance of integrating tobacco treatment into mental health and substance use services—something CHOICES has championed for 20 years, long

before it became a standard part of recovery-oriented care.

As I stood in that room surrounded by peers, partners, colleagues, and friends, I felt an overwhelming sense of pride—for our program, for our mission, and especially for our advocates. CHOICES exists today because of their commitment, their passion, and their willingness to share pieces of themselves in service of helping others heal.

Here's to 20 years of impact, growth, and community.

And here's to continuing the work—together—because we all have choices. And when we support one another, tobacco recovery becomes not just possible, but powerful.



Trish Dooley Budsock

Happy Holidays continued from page 5

planned, the start of a new calendar year brings renewed motivation for change. Many people want to break harmful habits this time of year but aren't sure how. Even though most smokers know cigarettes are dangerous, quitting is still difficult—so giving yourself an early start during the holidays can make all the difference.[2]

Why spend Christmas shivering outside with a cigarette when you could be warm indoors, enjoying every moment with the people who matter most?

1. Al-Hamdani, M., Carter-Rogers, K., Smith, S. M., & Stewart, S. (2023). "Quit Cold Turkey": Effects of a Quit-and-Win Smoking Cessation Challenge Offered at Christmas on Abstinence, Daily Cigarette Intake, and Cravings. *International Journal of Mental Health and Addiction*, 21(5), 3146-3161.
 2. Martin, P. Sticking to Our New Year's Resolutions.
 3. Reasons to quit smoking in the spirit of Christmas | Kea health. (n.d.). *Quit Smoking with NRT: Affordable Products & Expert Guidance* | KEA Health. <https://www.keahealth.com/advice/reasons-to-quit-smoking-in-the-spirit-of-christmas>

TESTIMONIALS

Thank you to our many programs who have supported us through the years and to those who were able to attend our luncheon or send encouraging testimonials to the CHOICES team. Here are a few we received;

**Michael Olshansky, Program Coordinator
Riverbank Community Wellness Center**

Happy 20th Anniversary to the NJ CHOICES team!

They are always so friendly, approachable, and deeply knowledgeable. Their staff are not only well-versed in the science and strategies of quitting smoking, but they also skillfully navigate the complex conversations around harm reduction and cessation. After their presentations clients feel both informed and empowered to make the best choices for themselves.

The team at NJ CHOICES brings a positive and uplifting attitude to everything they do. Their genuine commitment to client growth and wellbeing has left a lasting impact on countless individuals working toward healthier, smoke-free lives.

We at Riverbank Community Wellness Center extend our heartfelt gratitude to the entire NJ CHOICES staff for their dedication, compassion, and expertise. Happy 20th Anniversary! Thank you for all you do to support the community—you are truly making a difference.

**Lisanny Mendez, Wellness Center Mgr
Freedom Trail Community Wellness Ctr**

The work CHOICES has provided for Freedom Trail CWC was very helpful and informative. It is wonderful that a program like this exists with such a dedication to the health of others and keeping them informed regarding the dangers of smoking. Many of our members appreciated the information they received as well as the visual presentations. The members in our center were especially fond of the nutrition focused conversations. We are grateful for the collaboration with CHOICES and we hope to continue supporting such a helpful cause!

**Gianna Sanchez, Wellness Center Manager
Moving Forward Community Wellness Ctr**

Happy 20th Anniversary to the NJ CHOICES team!

NJ CHOICES has been a stable support for the Moving Forward Community Wellness Center and our members.

Every time they visit, our members are truly met with such a friendly, compassionate, and deeply knowledgeable team. Their staff are not only well-versed in the science and strategies of quitting smoking, but they also skillfully navigate the complex conversations around harm reduction and cessation. After their presentations our members feel both informed, empowered, and extremely supported to be able to make the best choices for themselves.

We are grateful to have had the opportunity for NJ CHOICES to run bi-weekly groups for our members for six months and to work with them on a consistent basis toward their personal and smoking-cessation goals. They always leave a positive impact on our staff and membership every time they visit.

The team at NJ CHOICES brings a positive and uplifting attitude to everything they do. Our members continuously look forward to their presentations and being able to share their personal progress in their wellness and recovery journeys. Their genuine commitment to client growth and wellbeing has left a lasting impact on countless individuals working toward healthier, smoke-free lives.

Our team at Moving Forward extends our heartfelt gratitude to the entire NJ CHOICES staff for their continuous dedication, compassion, and expertise with our community members. Happy 20th Anniversary NJ CHOICES! Thank you for everything you do to support the community—you are making a bigger difference than you know!

