

"Choices" at Atlantic Institution

What do a lifers' group, community residents, social workers, probation officers, group-home operators, foster parents, a Crown prosecutor and some parents of young offenders in the Atlantic region have in common? A desire to help young offenders stop returning to the courts.

An innovative program at Atlantic Institution, a maximum-security facility, involves weekly meetings between a small group of inmates, from diverse backgrounds and ages, and young offenders. The meetings take place in a supervised open meeting room in the institution. The Choices program originated in 1991, when members of the lifers' group at Atlantic Institution met with community residents who were seeking ways to help young offenders straighten out. Soon, various community professionals joined the effort.

Rather than using the scare tactics that have been used, unsuccessfully, in such programs as *Scared Straight*, the Choices program gives young offenders an opportunity to share thoughts, experiences and goals and a first-hand look at prison life. Topics discussed include education, employment, anger management, substance abuse, peer pressure, personal responsibility, family life and personal relationships. Instead of being confrontational, inmates take a supportive approach with the young offenders by using structured and unstructured discussions and sharing some of their experience and wisdom on the realities of prison and crime.

Summarized from articles in *The Times-Transcript*, 18 March 1992, and the *Miramichi Headwaters*, 17 March 1992.