

# NYC Condoms campaign is on a roll in Chelsea and beyond

BY LAWRENCE LERNER

When the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene unveiled its NYC Condoms initiative back on Valentine's Day, it hoped to make it all the way to second base. Four months into the campaign, it appears the department has hit a home run.

As of June 1, more than 14 million of the subway-themed condoms have gotten into the hands of New Yorkers, exceeding even the greatest hopes and expectations of department officials and the Bloomberg administration.

The milestone follows on the heels of a steady distribution surge that began with the condom's February debut, when the Health Department gave out nearly 4 million of them, causing Mayor Bloomberg's office to label the effort a "sensation." That was followed by 3.9 million given out in March—more than twice the monthly distribution before the new packages debuted. By early May, orders topped 11 million.

"We're getting New York City covered," said Health Commissioner Dr. Thomas R. Frieden. "This has been a huge success. Most [of the condoms] have gone to neighborhoods most affected by HIV and teen pregnancy."

That includes Chelsea.

While one in every three NYC Condoms went to organizations in Central Brooklyn, Central/East Harlem and the South Bronx, where the Health Department focuses outreach efforts, an additional 800,000 condoms have been distributed in Chelsea and Clinton, many of them at local businesses partnering with the city on the initiative.

"Customers come in all the time asking for NYC Condoms," said Megan Giometti, manager of Chelsea's Black Door bar,



Courtesy of New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene

which started distributing them two months ago, shortly after the campaign started. Every week or so, the bar receives a large package containing approximately 350 condoms. "They're great for business. People really want them and know we have them," she said.

Any New York City establishment—be it a health club, coffee house, bar, barbershop or clothing store—can become a partner in the campaign by calling 311 or visiting [www.nycondom.org](http://www.nycondom.org). The Health Department will deliver free NYC Condoms as needed to meet demand. In fact, the department placed an initial order for 26 million condoms from Lifestyles, the company that manufactures them, and will order more if need be, according to Frieden.

A few Chelsea businesses interviewed for this story verified that the demand has been high.

"I don't know how many condoms we get, but we go through them pretty quickly," said Sid Reitzfeld, co-owner of Chelsea's Dusk Lounge, which displays them in a box against a wall, by a set of couches. "People don't ask us directly about them, but we hear conversations about them. People seem to know about the program and think it's cool."

New York City's condom initiative dates back to 1971, when the Health Department started distributing them through its clinics. The program expanded during the 1980s to include community-based service organizations and increased more than seven-fold in June 2005, when the Department launched an Internet-based bulk ordering system.

This February, New York became the first city in the country to have its own signature municipal condoms, hoping the buzz would help distribution take off yet again. Last year, the city gave out 18 million free condoms, a mark it is rapidly closing in on this year, only four months into the new initiative.

The re-branding, supported by an onslaught of print and broadcast and advertising, plus wider distribution through not only community organizations but businesses throughout the city, have helped contribute to the campaign's success. All in all, more than 1,600 organizations and businesses are participating, and that number is bound to increase.

The free condom initiative is one important way the city is attempting to reduce rates of sexually transmitted diseases and unplanned pregnancies. Of New York's 8.2 million residents, more than 100,000 have HIV or AIDS, with many new diagnoses each year. In 2005, 1,400 city inhabitants died of AIDS, the third-leading killer for residents under 65,

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behind cancer and heart disease.

That didn't stop leaders of the Catholic Church from issuing a strongly worded statement against the plan back in mid-February, however, when Edward Cardinal Egan and Brooklyn Bishop Nicholas DiMarzio called it an immoral "anything goes" policy that degrades society.

"Our political leaders fail to protect the moral tone of our community when they encourage inappropriate sexual activity by blanketing our neighborhoods with condoms," they said.

The Bloomberg administration defended the \$1.5 million condom program, spearheaded by Frieden. In February, administration spokesperson Stu Loeser said, "With all due respect to Cardinal Egan and Bishop DiMarzio, we feel differently. We believe we're saving lives, and it's important to do that."

# Denied Pridefest permit, HOP pickets Gracie Mansion

BY DUNCAN OSBORNE

As Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg and City Council Speaker Christine Quinn enjoyed beer and barbecue under a tent outside of Gracie Mansion on Tuesday with hundreds of invited lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered guests, a handful of Heritage of Pride (HOP) members endured a soaking rain nearby as they protested the city's refusal to grant that group a permit to hold its annual PRIDEfest in Chelsea.

HOP, which produces the annual Gay Pride March, festival and rally, sought to move the festival late last year from the West Village following the march, on Sunday, June 24 this year, to the day before and to Chelsea. Believing that the city would approve a permit for the move, the non-profit group made no plans for holding the festival in the Village, as it has done for the past 15 years.

Saying it had a moratorium on issuing new street fair permits, the city denied HOP a permit for the new location and date on April 27, just two months before the event, leaving HOP with insufficient time to produce an alternative event. The festival was canceled on May 11.

HOP received the permit for the West Village location in late May, but it does not allow the group to have vendors. Brian



Left and Center photos: Brendan Keane, Right photo: Paul Schindler

**While City Council Speaker Christine Quinn and Mayor Michael Bloomberg spoke to a festive crowd estimated at 800 at the mayor's LGBT Pride celebration at Gracie Mansion, HOP members including Theary Chan and Phil Mennino protested denial of a PRIDEfest permit outside.**

O'Dell, the PRIDEfest committee's director, said mounting the festival would be impossible.

"We're talking about redesigning the booths, changing the rates," he said on Tuesday while standing in a pen of police sawhorses across the street from the mansion's entrance on East End Avenue. "We'd have to go through a whole rigmarole of negotiations with the city."

The HOP members, who were not invited to this year's reception, asked people streaming into the mansion to sign a petition calling on the city to allow the new

event and to wear black ribbons as a sign of protest. No ribbons were in evidence inside.

Bloomberg and Quinn, who had pressed City Hall to issue the new permit, were joined by Tim Gunn, host of "Project Runway," a Bravo "reality" show, for a best-dressed competition among some selected guests.

Quinn noted that she and Bloomberg would be walking together in this year's Pride March and, immediately following the reception, the two traveled to City Hall to announce they had reached an accord on

the city's \$59 billion budget.

HOP sought the new festival location because, increasingly, the vendors have been the usual collection found at any city street fair, and the West Village location was seen as unwelcoming to seniors, the disabled, and families with children. Community groups had stopped participating because their staff and volunteers were exhausted following the march. O'Dell said the new location and day had broad community support.

"That's why we do the festival, so that the LGBT groups could be there with the LGBT-identified businesses," he said.