Written by George E. Curry, NNPA Editor-in-Chief
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LAS VEGAS (NNPA) – No one should ever accuse organizers of Condom Nation, a project of the AIDS Healthcare Foundation, of thinking small. A year ago, they came up with the idea of traveling around the nation and dispensing 1 million free condoms in 25 cities. So far, it has visited 45 cities and distributed 4 million condoms.

“We did a testing tour in 2009,” said James Vellequette, director of Condom Nation. “We decided we were going to emulate that and by driving around the country giving away condoms.”

Next year, an even loftier goal has been set – worldwide distribution of 100 million condoms.

The primary goal is to reduce the number of HIV infections, Vellequette said. But Condom Nation does more than distribute condoms. The 18-wheel rig that Vellequette drives from city to city is equipped to administer HIV and STD tests. Partnering with local agencies, Condom Nation can also refer those who test positive to local agencies that can provide help.

Health officials said condoms are highly effective in reducing transmission of HIV.

According to a report by Population Action International, “Public health experts around the globe agree that condoms block contact with body fluids that can carry the HIV virus and have nearly 100 percent effectiveness when used correctly and consistently.”

But stigma, lack of access to free condoms and ignorance are factors that contribute to low condom use.

At a workshop here last week at the United States Conference on AIDS, James Vellequette, director of Condom Nation, discussed the problems – and excuses – that account for people not using condoms.

Recalling a recent trip to South Carolina, he said: “We were giving out condoms to people who just don’t have them, to agencies that just don’t have them, to health departments that just don’t have them.”

Vellequette said he has learned lessons by visiting so many cities. He’s had good success at intersections with four-way traffic lights, bars, college campuses and clubs.

“The beauty salons are the best,” he explained. “The responsibility has always been on men. A lot of women are .. taking responsibility for themselves.”

He said regardless of where he travels, men always have a ready excuse for not wearing condoms during intercourse.

“Every man in America told me he’s gifted,” Vellequette said, evoking laughter from the audience. He said he offers a variety of sizes and said he tells men, “If one of these don’t fit you, see a doctor.”

A member of the audience, Ron Crowder, of Street Works, Inc. in Nashville, Tenn., demonstrated a more effective way of addressing the issue. He said, “When they tell me they need a magnum, I just…” At that point, Crowder removed a condom from a wrapper and stretched it over his head.

With people still laughing, he said: “By the way, I do this with a regular condom.”

Some of Vellequette’s encounters take on a less humorous tone. In Louisiana, for example, he was confronted by a woman who accused him of condoning sex among teenagers. Instead of being defensive, Vellequette said, he tried to engage the woman in a conversation.

“When people say we shouldn’t do this, we say, ‘We support abstinence.’ But we always remind people that 70 percent of our STDs cases are coming from 15-24-year-olds. We don’t want our young people in high school having kids and having sex. We don’t want them to do that until they’re ready. But they are doing it, so what do we do? Should we write legislation based on how people are or how we want them to be?”

After national testing and condom tours, the next step is to form a Condom National network where health agencies and community organizations with limited funds can obtain condoms from his organization, which can obtain them for 3.6 cents per condom, about 400 percent less than the retail price.

Interested groups can obtain more information at www.condom-nation.org .

Vellequette said his organization and health agencies are all trying to answer one question: “How do I get a man or woman at 2:30 in the morning – half drunk – to just put on a condom and stop this virus?”