

April 14, 2003

UNDERCOVER TOBACCO TEENS KICKING BUTT

Push During School Break Reports 85% Compliance Rate Citywide

Some kids go on vacation during school break. Others smoke out tobacco retailers breaking the law.

Eighty kids participating in the New York City Department of Consumer Affairs (DCA) Youth Tobacco Enforcement Program went undercover with agency inspectors to pound the pavement last week inspecting nearly 800 tobacco retailers citywide for underage sales. After an aggressive push during the school break (April 21-27), DCA inspectors cited 117 retailers for illegally selling tobacco products to minors and 30 vendors for operating without a license. Penalties include fines of \$1,000 for a first offense and \$2,000 and possible license revocation for a second offense.

"We're pleased so many businesses are complying with the law, but there's still work to do," said DCA Commissioner Gretchen Dykstra. "The program is the best of both worlds, helping us make sure businesses are in compliance and giving the kids the opportunity to take pride in what they're doing and experience all the responsibilities that come with a regular job."

During the week, Queens had the highest compliance rate of all five boroughs at 92% followed by Brooklyn at 87%, the Bronx at 83%, Staten Island at 82%, and Manhattan at 81%.

DCA's Youth Tobacco Enforcement Program, the largest youth undercover initiative in the nation, is made possible by a New York State grant administered by the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene. Since the program began in 1997, the citywide compliance rate has increased by an impressive 30%. From October 2002 to the present, 5,500 inspections have been conducted and 968 violations have been issued for selling tobacco products to minors.

The program pays \$7.25 an hour (plus MetroCards) and is open to teens ages 14-17 years old. On average students can work 20-25 hours per week with flexibility, as inspections are conducted everyday. Those participating are also required to take a no-smoking pledge.

DCA enforces the New York City Consumer Protection Law, as well as other related laws, at thousands of businesses throughout New York City. DCA licenses more than 60,000 businesses in 55 different categories in New York City and educates both consumers and businesses alike through free community seminars, licensing forums, and other informational materials.

For more information or to file a complaint with DCA, call 3-1-1, the City's 24-hour citizen service hotline, or go online at <http://www.nyc.gov>.