

# Thirst:

When Water  
Meets a  
Higher Need

The Report and Results of the  
I Am Waters Foundation  
2010 Summer Water Project



# I Am Waters Foundation

## Summer Waters Project Report

### March 2011

We are pleased to provide the following outcomes report on the I Am Waters Foundation's 2010 Summer Water Project. Many people invested their time, energy, ideas, and funds in the project. We emphatically believe the project has provided a "Proof of Concept" that our branded water bottles and photo campaign make a measurable impact — an improvement in both the health and the outlook of the homeless. Furthermore, we believe the high return on investment for the 2010 program merits its continuation and expansion in 2011.

This is an evidence-based conclusion reached through analysis of the data, including surveys and interviews of the homeless we served, and surveys and interviews of the staff at local shelters and agencies through which we distributed water, all detailed in this document. The homeless' and shelter staffs' reactions and responses to our efforts, one after another, described the personal encouragement and inspiration each gained from our bottles and photos. In some cases, the homeless' reaction to the bottles and photos also showed a growing reengagement with society. Seemingly small changes can have a big impact.

It is a reengagement with society that will help point the homeless back to stable lives, with homes, jobs, family and community connections as contributing members of society who pay taxes, vote, raise families, and volunteer. In short, a way back to the American dream that unites us all.

We hope our clients, stakeholders, donors, and the community at large will feel as we do that we have demonstrated **a strong and positive return on our collective investment**. From project inception, we measured the effectiveness of our efforts from the standpoint of the needs and attitudes of the homeless clients we served, our shelter distribution system, and the return on our donors' charitable investment.

In this document, you will see a detailed project description, project accomplishments, and client and stakeholder feedback. Together, we have measured the value that the project brought to the homeless clients directly served by it, as well as to the larger community, by improving the lives of the homeless clients. Our goal is to share this report with the entire community so that all of us may learn and grow from our efforts.

With deepest thanks for the support of the shelters, our donors, and our friends to meet the needs of the American homeless,

Elena Davis  
President/Founder  
I Am Waters Foundation



# I Am Waters Foundation

## 2010 Water Project Preliminary Results and Report

### A (Silent) Problem

Most people we talk to are incredulous that any person in America today lacks access to clean, safe drinking water. Surely, people protest, free clean water is a third world problem. But sadly, we have found it is a real problem for the American homeless today. They ask, "What about public water fountains, bathrooms, and shelters?" As we discovered and will share with you, often the homeless are not welcome in public places for their appearance and behavior. Most shelters and homeless programs do provide free water to the homeless, but not all homeless programs are open daily, nor do all have bottles of water available to send off premises with the homeless, nor do they have capacity for all those in need. Since 35% of homeless have never used a shelter (1), getting clean water is an omnipresent problem for the homeless to battle daily. Most homeless, we learned, buy bottles of water to meet their hydration needs. It is disconcerting to realize that, with their limited resources, the homeless must spend money on something that the rest of us can generally take for granted.

### Our Story

I Am Waters Foundation was founded in 2008, driven by a mission to provide spiritual and physical hydration to the American homeless. We are committed to helping the American homeless meet their most basic human need for clean, safe drinking water, while encouraging their spiritual connection to others and themselves which we believe is absolutely necessary for their reengagement with society. The American homeless are faceless to most of society. Their invisibility and their lack of connection to a larger society is a serious impediment to achieving long-term stability. We are equally committed to educating the community at large about the changing face of today's homeless and how they can help bring the homeless back to being independent, productive members of our society.

To achieve these goals, I Am Waters (IAW) conceived a new and untested solution — one that addressed not only the problem of clean water, but also simultaneously offered encouragement and connections. IAW has established that delivering special

# “In June average daily temperature in Houston exceeds 90 degrees and that is when local shelters begin to worry about the effects of heat on the homeless.”

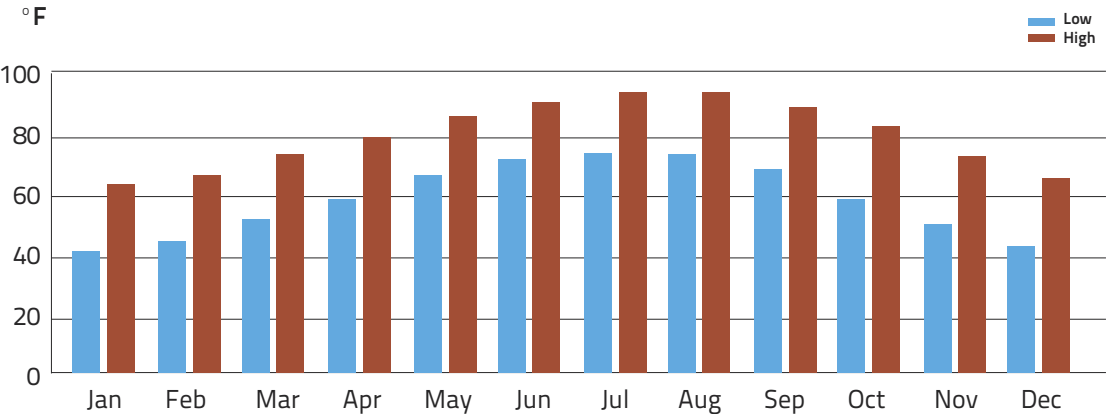
water bottles, labeled with an encouraging message and made expressly for homeless individuals, and taking photos of people experiencing homelessness can address all three of these problems. Water bottles offer safe, clean, portable drinking water; the words on the bottles offer encouragement and tell the homeless their needs are recognized by the community; and the photos help the homeless see themselves in a different light while sharing the new face of homelessness with the public. IAW is a young organization. The desire was to launch a program large enough to have a meaningful impact but small enough to be managed by a small team of volunteers and part-time summer staff.

By June 2010, in Houston, Texas, another hot, humid summer was brewing. In June the average daily temperature in Houston exceeds 90 degrees — and that is when local shelters begin to

worry about the effects of heat on the homeless. Summers are long in Houston, with the average daily temperature holding at 89 degrees or above through September each year (2).

But this year, the homeless and local shelters had a new ally to provide clean, safe drinking water in the heat of summer. IAW introduced its major effort to design and distribute 76,000 inspirational bottles of clean, safe, portable drinking water to area homeless during the most blistering Texas heat. Working through local shelters for ten weeks from June to August, IAW volunteers and staff delivered their specially branded bottles of purified drinking water, week after week. IAW also took professional portraits of the homeless, with their permission, set against a seamless white background, which we printed and returned to them in a week’s time.

**AVERAGE TEMPERATURE IN HOUSTON**



# The Premise: Water Can Help Meet a Higher Need

When we launched the project, there may have been skeptics that such a seemingly minor gesture as water bottles could have a meaningful impact on a problem as huge as homelessness. Others may have wondered about our imperative to add messages and photos to the delivery of water. Thankfully though, the community allowed us to test the ideas through their support and interest.

Our data found that these *small changes actually can have big impact*. In fact the data suggest the bottle's message can be more important to the recipient than the water itself and that the photos provide the sitters with a bridge to their past and future that they cannot always reach otherwise. We see a similarity in the "Broken Window" theory of crime in which the apparently small change of cleaning up graffiti, clearing garbage, and fixing broken windows can substantially reduce crime in a neighborhood (3). Passing out water bottles goes even further because it is not only a symbolic change, like cleaning up graffiti, but it also addresses a very real problem of limited access to clean drinking water. At the same time, it has important symbolic value for the recipients.

In addition to delivering water, IAW took photo portraits of the homeless. At first glance, the photo campaign may appear to have less direct impact on the outlook of the homeless recipients than the delivery of water. But the photos can be an important tool, bringing homelessness out from under a double veil of invisibility in which



people who are homeless feel invisible to society and the public can not see the homeless who exist around them. The distribution of images in our society parallels a broader hierarchy, according to Dr. William Roy, Professor and Chair of the UCLA Department of Sociology. Celebrities, politicians and at least some of the very wealthy are especially likely to be captured in images. Middle class people have family snapshots, high school yearbooks, and Facebook. The poor, and especially the homeless, are rarely caught in images, especially images for themselves. Thus their invisibility is literal as well as figurative.

The homeless lack basic necessities — food, water, and shelter — which challenge their daily existence. Even if we were to solve these problems, there would remain other impediments that compromise the homeless' ability to overcome their challenges and reenter society. This can be understood in a very basic way through Maslow's hierarchy of needs, which we may recall from high school. A premise of the IAW project is to meet a fundamental human need — safe, clean drinking water — while simultaneously meeting a higher level human need, the need for self-actualization, by delivering this water in an inspirational bottle made expressly for the homeless.

< Return on Investment as illustrated with Maslow's hierarchy of needs.



## I Am Waters Our Bottles

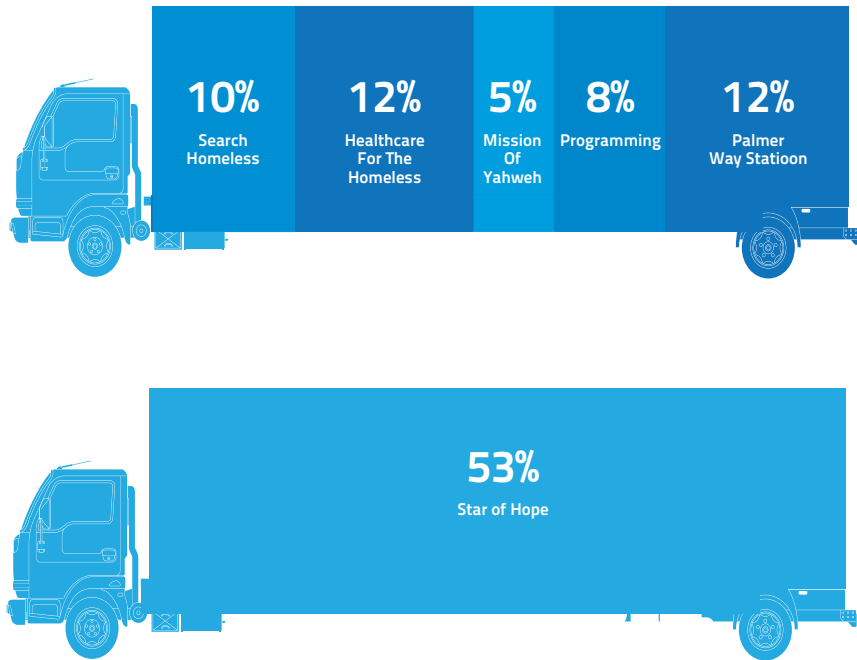
IAW produced two different bottles for the project. Both were 16.9 oz. smooth sided clear plastic bottles containing purified drinking water and each featured a single inspirational word on its label. One bottle read HOPE, the other PEACE, both boldly printed in black on a white background, with minimal other text or graphics to muddy the message. The result was a simple, evocative design, created by IAW with New York-based graphic designer, Nancy Herrmann, head of design for L’Oreal Paris. In total, 76,000 bottles were produced for IAW by Essence Bottling in Lubbock, Texas. IAW has trademarked its bottle phrases, both those used this summer and ones planned for future projects. For its control groups in the assessment, IAW also purchased 3,927 bottles of commercially available bottled water such as Ozarka® or grocery store brands and distributed them through project partners, bringing the total distribution for summer 2010 to 79,927.

Houston, Texas was selected for the site of the project. The project had two major parts, plus an evaluation/assessment component. The first was to deliver inspirational bottles of water weekly during the hottest ten weeks of the summer (June 15

to August 15) to carefully selected water partners, homeless shelters, and homeless service agencies. IAW would allow the partners to distribute the bottles to their clients as they deemed best. The shelters determined their water needs in advance and asked for a specific number of bottles weekly. IAW was able to fill their entire requests, and increased their deliveries to shelters whose needs increased. For one homeless program, IAW was able to continue deliveries through the fall and winter, because the program had no regular means of securing water for its clients who need it for medical reasons.

### Our Photos

Noted Houston photographer Jack Thompson took the summer portraits, which were head shots or full body shots set against a white backdrop. IAW developed and printed the color portraits on 8”x10” paper, laminated them, and returned them to the subjects. IAW provided each sitter with several photos so they could keep one and share others as a means to reconnect with family and friends if they chose. With the subjects’ written permission, IAW will share the photos on its website and printed materials to help put a face on today’s homeless.



### Program Partners

Because many homeless have issues with trust, it was important to reach them through avenues with which they were already comfortable. IAW selected six shelters and homeless agencies as its initial project partners. These included SEARCH Homeless Services, Star of Hope, Palmer Way Station at Palmer Episcopal Church, Healthcare for the Homeless, Turning Point Center, and Mission of Yahweh. The first four are located in central Houston in midtown, downtown, or the Texas Medical Center. Mission of Yahweh and Turning Point are in residential neighborhoods outside of Loop 610.

*SEARCH Homeless Services* — a large shelter with multiple components (transitional adult living, family transitional living, mobile outreach van, daily services including meals, and case management), SEARCH received IAW branded water for its outreach van and day services clients. SEARCH also runs the House of Tiny Treasures, an early childcare education center for its clients’ children.

*Star of Hope* — a large shelter with multiple components (women and families transitional living, mobile outreach van, men’s development center, women and families shelter, daily services including meals and case management), Star of Hope received IAW branded water for its outreach van and transitional family shelter.

*Palmer Way Station* — offers breakfast daily and some services. Serving primarily homeless men who do not come to shelters, the Way Station received IAW branded water for its breakfast program.

*Healthcare for the Homeless* — provides medical and dental services to the homeless. They received Ozarka® water, a popular line of bottled water sold at Texas grocery stores, and IAW branded water for its medical clients who used it to rehydrate and take their medications.

*Mission of Yahweh* — a temporary living center for single women and women with children — received Ozarka® water and IAW branded water.

*Turning Point* — a transitional longer-term living center for adult men without children — initially participated just in the image campaign and surveys, then received some IAW branded water.

### Delivery Method

IAW worked with director-level staff at each organization on how best to meet their water needs with IAW water. Each shelter estimated its weekly needs for specific programs and made a request to IAW. In turn, IAW made a commitment to provide the water weekly. Based on the storage capacity and needs of each partner, IAW volunteers and summer staff delivered water weekly if needed, less often if the partner could store it. Star of Hope was the only partner able to take the full ten-week shipment at once. Prior to this project, each partner met their clients’ water needs differently. Some bought water bottles to distribute, some received donated products like sports drinks, while others offered tap water.

Shelter staff and volunteers were responsible for circulating IAW bottled water to clients in a fashion that best accommodated the particular program’s operational needs. For example, at SEARCH, the water was distributed on thrice weekly rounds of its mobile outreach van and during mealtimes at the organization’s day center. At Palmer Way Station, water was handed out with breakfast. At Star of Hope, water was delivered on the mobile outreach van, at their women and children emergency shelter and men’s emergency shelter, as well as to residents of its family temporary housing. At Healthcare for the Homeless, clients were offered IAW bottles to take their medication.

# I Am Waters Image Campaign

The IAW image or photo campaign was instituted at three partner locations, Turning Point Center; SEARCH Homeless Services; and SEARCH's early childhood education program, House of Tiny Treasures. At SEARCH, IAW set up a weekly photo shoot where clients awaiting services could choose to have their pictures taken. IAW developed the images as 8"x10" prints, laminated them, and returned the photographs to the subjects a week later. In total, IAW took portraits of 60 individuals during its 2010 summer project. A total of 1,429 photographs were taken; an average of three photographs were given to each person.

Our survey data showed that the response to the photos was overwhelmingly positive. Shelter staff reported that the recipients felt important when they had their pictures taken. Having their photo taken encouraged the sitters to make connections to their past and their future. Conversations with the sitters touched on finding new hope and building self-confidence — critical moments on a path to reengaging with society. For example, upon receiving their photos, recipients were often transported to the last time they sat for a family portrait. Several sitters explained that their last portrait was taken as a child or adolescent during the last relatively stable stage of their lives. Other sitters were able to look at their photo and objectively describe the hopes and struggles of the person in the photo, whereas they could not answer any of these questions about themselves when asked point blank. The photo offered them an objectivity about themselves they could not grasp on their own.





**We Are Family**



**I Am Homeless**



**I Am Hope**

**I Am Hope**



**I Am Wisdom**



**I Am Peace  
Hope  
Love**



**I Am American**



**I Am Homeless**



**We Are You**



**I Am Love**



**I Am Faith**



**We Are Brothers**



**We Are American**



**I Am Homeless**

**We Are Blessed**



**I Am American**



**I Am Peace**



**We Are Love**



**We are Family**



# I Am Waters Project Assessment

IAW knew from the start that assessment would be an integral part of the project, as important as the design and delivery of the branded water bottles, in order to measure the effectiveness of our novel approach. IAW spent hours prior to the project launch trying, unsuccessfully, to find others in the United States studying the issues of water and the homeless, and the related issues of heat-related injury, self-awareness, and hope. IAW plans to make a rigorous assessment part of all its future activities, so that over time we will contribute to a larger body of knowledge about the homeless, their needs, and their conditions.

“If I’m thinking about my situation and how everything is dark and dismal, I’ll start creating different words for each letter to give myself a spark of **encouragement**. Like the word PEACE on the bottle of water: I can take the “P” and say PEACE “E” Easily “A” Accepting “C” Circumstances “E” Everyday.”

B. Devon Robinson, SEARCH Homeless Services



## I Am Waters

### *The Assessment Aims*

IAW started with four issues we wanted to investigate:

1. How do the homeless access safe, clean drinking water and are their water needs fully met?
2. What are the homeless' understanding and personal history of heat-related injuries, and the role that a lack of access to water played in these injuries?
3. Would an inspirational water bottle provide comfort and encouragement to the homeless and let them know society cares about them?
4. Would professionally photographed portraits of the homeless improve the outlook of the homeless and help strengthen their connection to the community at large?

Both issues three and four require a length of time to answer,

and IAW realized the ten-week project timeline would not allow for a meaningful measurement of change in long-term outlook. But we thought that it was important to start this measurement, and possibly, try to collect some very short-term data about attitude changes.

#### **Survey Methodology**

IAW worked with the renowned UCLA Department of Sociology to develop a survey for the homeless served in the project. We are most grateful to Chairman William Roy and Professor Forrest Stuart, both of the UCLA Department of Sociology, for their help reviewing survey questions and helping us to understand and analyze the responses and results.

The goal of the evaluation was to assess the impact of the water



“Sometimes water is clear and it’s not contaminated ... I can’t tell the difference. I got too hot and **dehydrated**, I almost passed out because I didn’t have water.”

Rowland Boone

and photos individually and collectively. Surveys were conducted on-site at partner locations. To make the homeless more comfortable, their surveys were conducted orally by IAW president Elena Davis. Survey questions were both closed- and open-ended. Each survey and interview was video recorded, if the recipient agreed (all did). In total, 37 surveys of homeless men and women were conducted, of which 31 were first interviews, and 6 were “follow up” interviews, to capture change in attitude after receiving the water regularly for 1 month. IAW also conducted 21 open-ended interviews with homeless individuals and its partners’ staff, with 39 responses as of January 14, 2011. This is a total of 97 clients and stakeholders surveyed or interviewed for the summer project.

The data collection methods were designed to assist in gathering data representative of all individuals served in the water bottle distribution and image campaign, although there

was no attempt to ensure the sample of participants was statistically representative.

With the help of Drs. Roy and Stuart, IAW distilled the project’s assessment aims into five primary, measurable research questions:

1. Where do the homeless get water, and do they worry about their ability to get it daily?
2. Has the lack of clean, safe drinking water ever led them to experience a heat-related injury?
3. Was the IAW bottle meaningful and did it provide inspiration or positive feelings to the homeless?
4. Does the image campaign provide inspiration or positive feelings to the homeless?
5. Is the positive value of the IAW branded bottle enough to justify the expense of custom producing it, as opposed to giving the homeless a commercially available bottled water?

# Mark Gund

## Turning Point Center Summer 2010

### Homeless Survey Questions

The first set of survey questions queried the homeless about where they get water, as well as if they worry about their ability to get clean, safe drinking water on a daily basis. The second set of questions asked the homeless about their understanding of heat-related injuries: if they had ever experienced a heat-related injury and, if so, was it due to a lack of safe, available water.

The third set of questions confirmed their homelessness and asked about their outlook on being homeless and attitudes/opinions/timeframe for getting back on their feet. It also asked about the external or internal factors they deemed most important in determining their future.

The next section asked if they had received an IAW branded bottle and, if so, what words they remembered from the bottles; if the words held any meaning; what was that meaning; and if they discussed the words with others.

The final section asked if they had been photographed by IAW. If they had been photographed, they were asked if they had other photos of themselves and when the last photo was taken. The survey also asked what the photo session experience was like; how they felt waiting for the picture; if they liked the picture; if they would keep it or share it; and if they were willing to share the picture with the public to put a face on today's homeless.

“I leaned up against the tree and looked up and saw a bottle of water sittin’ in the branch, I reached up for it, looked at the label and it said ‘I Am... I thought well, it’s from the great **I Am**, it was sent to me from the Lord above...”



# Survey Response Highlights

“When the staff at the shelter I am staying gave me my first bottle of I Am Waters with the word **PEACE** on the bottle it kind of threw me, I thought I was getting a message from God, and truthfully I believe so. I mean okay Lord, I hope I get to the next level or get to the next person and hope whoever I’m facing asking for help will help me.”

Mrs. Bienvenue | Star of Hopes

## Access to Water

Over three-quarters of homeless surveyed reported feeling thirsty without knowing if they could get clean water quickly. Overwhelmingly homeless surveyed purchased bottled water (40.9%) or received it at a shelter (45.5%) though IAW only surveyed people at shelters. Less than 10% used a public water fountain or received water from a store or restaurant.

Two-thirds of the homeless surveyed reported they were not certain on a daily basis of their access to clean drinking water. Forty percent reported being certain of clean drinking water only some of the time or rarely.

## Heat-Related Injuries

Of those surveyed, 86% had experienced a heat-related injury. Ninety percent attributed the injury to a lack of water, because they did not have access to water (64%) or avoided access (37%).

## Attitudes

Most of the people surveyed in the shelters about the water felt better about themselves (66%) than they had a month ago and virtually all had hope that their situation would improve within one year (95%).

## Situational Improvement

When queried about what it would take to improve (or damage) their situation in the near future, 65% of the homeless responded that they felt their own efforts were the most important element,

40.9% of the homeless surveyed purchased bottled water 45.5% received water at a shelter.

followed by help from others (35%). Half of the group felt luck had nothing to do with their situation, while the remainder was split in believing it was somewhat to quite important. Only 5% believed luck was the only thing that mattered in improving (or damaging) their situation.

## Bottles

Every person (100%) remembered well that the bottles had words on them and all remembered the words. Nearly three-quarters of respondents said they seriously contemplated the words on the bottles. About one in five reported they discussed the words on the bottles with others many times.

None of the respondents realized the bottles had been made expressly for the homeless. All reported upon learning this that the bottles made them feel people cared about their plight.

## Image Campaign/Photos

Almost all (95%) of photo sitters enjoyed having their picture taken by a professional and most liked the result a great deal. All of them wanted to keep the photo, and 83% wanted to share their picture with the larger community so the community could be helped to understand that good people become homeless.

# Mrs. Bienvenue

## Start of Hope Summer 2010

“When you’re out there on those streets, because this is the inside, but when you leave outside this door for those eight hours trying to get yourself done and **make your life** and you pull out of your purse a bottle that says, ‘PEACE’ or ‘HOPE’ and when I see it, then I just say alright.”

Mrs. Bienvenue | Star of Hope



# I Am Waters

## Shelter Partner Interviews and Surveys

IAW spoke formally and informally with the staff of all six partners to collect data — quantitative and qualitative — about the project and its impact upon the homeless. The questions focused on the effect the bottles had upon their homeless clients, their attitudes about receiving Ozarka® versus IAW water, and the staff's reaction to them. Staff also provided written comments via email about the project. IAW asked staff from the partners to complete an online survey in December 2010.

The first set of survey questions queried staff whether they had provided water in the past to their clients, how they secured it, and if IAW's water freed up institutional resources for other needs. It also asked if they wished IAW to provide water in summer 2011 and to estimate their weekly water needs for the summer.

The second set of questions asked staff about their understanding of heat-related injuries, including if they had knowledge of whether their homeless clients had suffered heat-related injuries and whether they viewed heat-related injuries as a major issue for their clients in the summer.

The next section asked if staff had a reaction to the IAW branded bottle and, if so, what words they remembered from the bottles; if the words held any meaning; what was that meaning; and if they discussed the words with others.

The final section asked for their overall opinions of working with IAW as an organization, including its organization, flexibility, and responsiveness.



# Shelter Partner Survey Response Highlights

Thirty-nine staff members at three of the six participating shelters completed the survey. This was a broad range of people from executive director level to program staff. Some had extensive contact with IAW staff and volunteers, and determined the programs within their shelter that would be furnished with water and at what levels. Other respondents helped distribute water to clients, but did not control how much water they received (other staff from their organization determined this). Not all respondents interacted directly with IAW staff/volunteers.

## Provision of Water

About half reported they had given out water in the summer prior to the IAW summer water project. Of those who had distributed water in the past, about 25% used institutional funds to purchase water or flavored drinks, 50% used donated beverages, and 15% used tap water. The remainder were not sure what was given previously.

Half reported that IAW's water donation freed up institutional resources for other items, while 43% were unsure if it did, and 6% reported it did not free up resources.

Nearly half reported that IAW met most of their water needs, one-third reported it met much of their needs; and the remainder were not sure or said it met less than a quarter of their needs.

An overwhelming majority (94%) would like IAW to meet their summer water needs in 2011, while 6% were unsure.

## Heat-Related Injuries

Nine out of ten staff respondents knew the signs of heat-related injuries and eight out of ten staff members had seen clients come into their program suffering from a heat-related injury.

Two-thirds responded that some or most of their clients knew the signs of a heat-related injury while one quarter were not sure if clients knew the signs or were certain they did not know them.

Given the diversity of needs and problems faced by their clients, over 91% of staff reported that helping their clients learn to recognize and prevent heat-related injuries was either quite valuable (49%) or among the most valuable things (42%) they could do for their clients. Nine out of ten staff would welcome help educating their clients about heat-related injuries.

## Staffs' Reaction to the IAW Water Bottles

The staff were clearly affected by the bottles and moved by the effect the bottles had on their clients. Almost every staff member (93%) recalled the bottles had words on them and remembered correctly what the words were. Two-thirds were themselves personally affected by the words, either frequently or almost always. All but two respondents thought the words added value to the bottles, including 57% who thought they added a lot to a great deal of value.

One respondent said that for their clients, "the words were honestly MORE important than the water itself. Many told me that they would just refill it and refill it. These kind of inspirational things are just so critical for this population because they are normally surrounded by so much ugliness and so much that wants to tear them down. What a wonderful thing it was to be able to give them something they can TAKE WITH THEM that builds them up."

## Homeless' Reaction to the IAW Water Bottles

Most of the staff (75%) reported hearing the homeless clients discuss the words on the bottle either "occasionally," "frequently," or "all of the time."

One staff member reported, "I mostly heard people discussing the meaning of the words, but one time I specifically overheard a conversation about why someone would care enough about homeless people to make bottles with those words on them."

One respondent reported, "I'm a psychotherapist, so many times the words were discussed during individual and

group therapy sessions. Talking about them deepened discussions about other significant issues in my clients' lives."

Another staff member reported, "A few became overcome with the feeling that they were like refugees. Many were visibly moved by the kind words."

Another reported, "Many clients felt that the special bottles with the encouraging words were made specifically for them. They valued that someone cared enough to make these attractive bottles. Many of them saved them because they were afraid they would not be able to get them in the future."

## Changes in the Homeless

From the beginning of the project to the end, nearly 54% of staff saw attitude changes in their clients receiving the IAW bottles, ranging from a few changes (27%) to many changes (27%).

## Image Campaign

A great majority (80%) of the staff whose clients were photographed by IAW reported their clients really enjoyed having their portraits taken. More than half (60%) of respondents saw an attitude change in those who had their pictures taken, and just over half had discussed the pictures with their clients.

One staff member reported, "I can't think of a specific statement, but I know the clients state they feel 'important' when their pictures are taken."

## Shelters Experience with IAW

On a scale from 1 to 5, with 5 being the best, 98% of shelter staff awarded IAW a 4 or 5 for the respect it showed to the shelters' staff and clients. Almost every shelter staff member (96%) gave IAW a 4 or 5 for the overall experience of working with IAW and for IAW's dependability in delivering what it promised, when it promised.

One respondent summarized, "IAW helped in whatever way was needed."

# I Am Waters Bottled Waters

## Choice of PET Bottles

Before selecting PET for its water bottles, IAW spent a great deal of time and energy researching the best way to deliver water to people without access to potable water. In the earliest days, IAW considered every kind of green initiative, including retrofitting fire hydrants to provide public water sources. For its 2010 summer water distribution, IAW selected recyclable thermoplastic bottles made of polyethylene terephthalate or PET. Because there is sensitivity to plastic bottles and a perception that they are an environmentally unfriendly option, IAW seriously explored cornstarch, cardboard, glass, thin PET bottles, and aluminum refillable bottles as alternatives to PET. For IAW and the American homeless today, it turns out that currently there is no better alternative to PET bottles. Why? Cornstarch is expensive and difficult to source; glass is heavy and breaks; cardboard (milk cartons) is not as recyclable and there are fewer plants that process this material after disposal; and thin PET bottles are not refillable.

In the current scope of its activities, PET bottles can provide the most safe, clean drinking water to the largest number of homeless in Texas for the money donated. In short, we can protect more lives per dollar with PET bottles. Indeed, IAW believes that, if there is a persuasive societal argument for the use of PET bottles anywhere, it is as portable water containers for a segment of society that lacks regular access to tap water, and who must carry their own water and refill it when possible. For today in Texas at least, PET is the most effective solution.

At the project onset, IAW was concerned with the bottles becoming litter, so we researched ways to collect them once they were empty to trash or recycle them. Yet in a miraculous way, none of the bottles showed up in the gutters and sidewalks of the areas where the water was distributed. The intent of bottles was to create a talisman of hope, to be cherished by the recipient. To that end IAW was successful. People have kept them, or discarded them properly.



“Emotionally, the hardest part of being homeless is to start believing that it’s your station in life. When you start believing that, you’re in trouble!”

Don Hall | Staff | SEARCH Homeless Services

#### Custom Bottles vs. Commercial Bottles

IAW’s final research question specifically examined the return on investment for the project. IAW asked ourselves: Is the positive value of the IAW branded bottle enough to justify the expense of custom producing it, as opposed to giving the homeless a commercially available bottled water?

IAW’s operating expenses for FY2010 were \$120,122, which supported the summer water project costs, community education, outreach and general program costs. All expenses were covered by contributions from individuals and foundations, with gifts ranging from \$40 to \$40,000.

Based on the survey responses from staff and the homeless, IAW concluded the cost for custom inspirational bottles was well justified. In fact, bottling costs are just a portion of overall

operating costs of the project and are roughly double the cost of purchasing and delivering Ozarka® or other water brands. IAW believes the cost of custom bottles and providing community education is money well spent.

#### How Big Is the Thirst/How Big Is the Problem?

Homelessness is generally counted two ways — a “snapshot” or point-in-time, single-night count that takes place across the country, and comprehensively, by counting the number of people who used a shelter throughout a year. Counting the homeless is obviously difficult and IAW commends the organizations who lead this work. IAW believes each approach is valid but has limitations, too, that make it difficult to understand the totality of the problem. The single-night snapshot attempts to capture both people who are sheltered and those who are not, but it is only one point in time. While the total annual shelter figure

accounts for people who are homeless throughout the year, they must utilize shelters to be included in the count, and not all homeless do use shelters.

According to the 2009 Annual Homeless Assessment Report to Congress (4), on a single night in January 2009, there were an estimated 643,067 sheltered and unsheltered homeless people nationwide. More than 6 in 10 people who were homeless at this single point-in-time were in emergency shelters or transitional housing programs, while 37% were unsheltered on the "street" or in other places not meant for human habitation.

Furthermore, an estimated 1.56 million men, women, and children used an emergency shelter or transitional living center between October 2008 and September 2009. Homelessness is changing in the current economic climate — affecting whole new swaths of society. While chronic homelessness dropped between 2008 and 2009, the number of families using shelters has increased about 30% since 2007.

#### Can IAW Quench our Nation's Thirst?

The board and staff of IAW believe this organization can grow to someday quench the thirst of every homeless man, woman, and child in America. Homelessness has been growing significantly for the past four decades. It will take many efforts to decrease homelessness in America — not just those of I Am Waters or our shelter partners. Today, no other organization in the country is looking at the water needs of the American homeless and the physical health issues of heat-related injuries,

as well as the homeless' psyches.

IAW distributed nearly 80,000 water bottles to the homeless during the summer. IAW proposes to increase its water distribution, city by city, year by year, to meet the needs of all American homeless. What would it take for IAW to meet the water need of every homeless American during the hottest summer months every year? Here are back of the napkin calculations: To quench the thirst of every homeless person during the height of summer it would take about 108 million bottles of water. That is 643,067 sheltered and unsheltered people x 12 weeks of summer x 2 bottles of water daily = 108,035,256 bottles of water per year.

You can argue up and down the amount of water, number of days needed, and number of people. But even with tweaks up and down, the round figure of a 100 million bottles a year is the figure that drives IAW to move forward aggressively.

Currently, American consumers buy more than 27.9 billion single-serve bottles of water per year (5). IAW's target of 100 million bottles is just 3.5% of that figure. Will this take 5 years, 10 years, or 20 years to achieve? There is not a simple answer, but one based on resources, partnerships, and drive. IAW is currently fundraising to double our Houston distribution in 2011 which would include slightly more bottles delivered weekly and stretch deliveries from 10 to 16 weeks, or June to September, at the request of our shelter partners.

This, we believe, would reach the basic water needs of Houston's homeless. Based on available funding, IAW will expand delivery to new cities in Texas and the United States in 2011 and beyond.



# I Am Waters Foundation

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For more information, please visit the IAW website [www.iamwaters.com](http://www.iamwaters.com). For daily postings of articles about the American homeless, follow us at [facebook.com/iamwaters](https://facebook.com/iamwaters).

To see outtakes of video interviews of homeless surveyed in this project, and of IAW supporters, go to YouTube and search for I Am Waters Foundation.

## Footnotes

- 1 <http://www.rssweather.com/climate/Texas/Houston/>
- 2 [http://www.huduser.org/publications/homeless/homelessness/ch\\_3f.html](http://www.huduser.org/publications/homeless/homelessness/ch_3f.html)
- 3 Fixing Broken Windows: Restoring Order and Reducing Crime in Our Communities, Kelling, George L. and Catherine Coles, 1996.
- 4 The 2009 Annual Homeless Assessment Report to Congress, [http://www.huduser.org/Publications/pdf/2009\\_homeless\\_508.pdf](http://www.huduser.org/Publications/pdf/2009_homeless_508.pdf)
- 5 <http://www.container-recycling.org/assets/pdfs/reports/2007-waterwater.pdf>