

Media Release



Federation of
Community Legal Centres
VICTORIA

Groundbreaking debt relief work honoured

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Long serving community lawyer, Denis Nelthorpe, whose groundbreaking work has seen millions of dollars of debts against vulnerable Australians written off, has received the prestigious Tim McCoy Award for 2010.

The Tim McCoy Award recognises outstanding work in the community law or legal aid movement with a particular focus on the promotion of human rights for socially and economically disadvantaged Victorians. The award celebrates the life of the late community lawyer and activist, Tim McCoy (1956-1987).

This year's award recognises Denis' Bulk Debt Negotiation Project which has developed an innovative method of resolving debts owed by poor and disadvantaged consumers to insurance companies and major lenders.

Under the law, a creditor cannot enforce a debt against a debtor whose only income is from Centrelink and whose only assets are basic household items. Yet, many creditors continue to chase debts when there is no realistic prospect of any recovery.

Through the project, Denis has assisted over 500 clients referred to him from over 100 community legal centres and financial counsellors around Australia. The clients, who typically have experienced severe social and financial hardship, owed debts to major lenders and insurance companies. Denis engaged in coordinated bulk negotiations with these organisations, and so far, has resolved over \$2 million of debts with a further \$2.5 million currently under negotiation.

Denis' innovative work is alleviating stress for disadvantaged debtors, reducing reliance on emergency relief services and helping lenders to identify debts which should not be pursued due to the disadvantage experienced by the debtor. His work is also improving the way community legal centres and financial counsellors resolve debt matters, saving many hundreds of hours of work through the efficient resolution of matters. Denis' work is transforming the debt collection practises of major organisations through negotiated resolutions to stop attempts to collect debts where it would be unethical to do so.

Denis has been a passionate advocate for justice for disadvantaged Australians for around 25 years. He currently manages the Footscray Community Legal Centre, works as a special projects lawyer at the West Heidelberg Community Legal Service (WHCLS) and is on the management committee of the Moonee Valley Legal Service. He is also on the board of the Financial Ombudsman Service.

Typically humble in receiving his award, Denis noted the contribution of others to his project.

Further information:

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