THE Singapore Association for Mental Health (SAMH) and the Society for the Physically Disabled (SPD) took home the inaugural Charity Governance Awards yesterday.

SAMH, which promotes awareness of mental health issues here, won the award for small and medium-sized charities, while SPD, which helps people with disabilities integrate into society, was the winner in the large-charities category.

The award is an initiative of the 14-member Charity Council, in partnership with the National University of Singapore's Asia Centre for Social Entrepreneurship and Philanthropy.

Award nominees had to have complied with all applicable guidelines and principles of the Code of Governance for charities and institutions of a public character here. Winners were each presented a plaque and $10,000 sponsored by the Lee Foundation.

Speaking at the award ceremony yesterday evening, Charity Council chairman Fang Ai Lian explained what made these two charities worthy of recognition.

She said SAMH board members actively undergo training and regularly conduct self-evaluation to assess their performance.

The charity is also enlightened in that it encourages vigorous yet respectful debate among board and its staff. Feedback is gathered frequently.

"This desire to improve, learn and grow is what makes SAMH the outstanding organisation that they are," she said.

Turning to SPD, she said it actively seeks out successors and grooms them with a target takeover date.
It also publishes a bi-annual update and a quarterly newsletter to inform donors how their funds are being used, she said.

At the ceremony, Acting Minister for Culture, Community and Youth Lawrence Wong said Singapore’s charity landscape is evolving in a positive way.

Donations hit a record high of $896 million last year, a 15 per cent increase from the $776 million the year before, noted Mr Wong, who is also Senior Minister of State for Communications and Information. "People from all walks of life respond to appeals for good causes. . . When they contribute, they expect that the cause is worthy and the organisation is properly run," he said.

A one-size-fits-all governance model does not exist, he said, adding that the key is to build a framework around sound governance principles, and regularly review these principles.