Honouring transparency
Queen's School of Business and CPA-Ontario announce the Voluntary Sector Reporting Awards winners

With charitable donors ask- ing more questions than ever about how their dollars are spent, it's vital that non-profit organizations be able to pro vide simple yet comprehen sive answers.

For the past six years, the Voluntary Sector Reporting Awards (VSRA) have helped more than 400 non-profits, most of them in Ontario, get better at talking the public what they do and why it costs to go about their jobs.

The awards, organized by the CPA-Queen's Centre for Governance, were created as “an educational program more than a competition,” says director Steve Salterio. Last year, more than a decade ago, most non-profits didn’t discuss financial matters or expect to model their reports on pro ceed to the Canada Revenue Agency website, he says. Today, however, it is rare to see a group that doesn’t have an ac ceptably comprehensive report. “We’ve tried to lead by the power of positive example.”

One organization that has participated in the VSRA since the beginning and is being honoured this year, not just as a winner but as an exemplar, is Hospice King Aurora, which has just three employees and receives 15% of its funding from donations. It is located in Aurora, Ont., just north of Toronto.

“We received amazing feedback, which is why we kept go ing,” says director of programs Heidi Roman, who notes the in-depth critiques from the judges allowed the hospice to improve its annual report year after year. “It shows to our funders and donors that we are serious about accountability. It also means a lot to our employees and receives 75% of its funding from donations. It is located in Aurora, Ont., just north of Toronto.

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“She says one of the VSRA winners was a couple of years down the road from its annual report was “fun” and suggested that anyone reading it would feel comfortable giving to the organization’s commitment to best practices. “We wanted to make a ‘pre-emptive move’ to show funders and donors that we work hard and develop healthy relationship ships in our community. Almost all the YouCan staff is under 30. They wanted to make a difference for children that, last year, we thought we’d take the challenge.” Thanks to these efforts, we received the award because the board and staff work so hard. And it also means a lot to our donors. If you want to make a difference for children, that report helps (our organization’s) thinking come to life.

While putting together transparent financial statements and accessible in formation, the VSRA requires demands considerable effort, participants say it is worth the effort. “We work on it as a team, spread the load of time and include all stakeholders that really reflect who we are and the heart of our business,” says Kim Lenihan, CEO of Vita Community Living, an Ontario winner that was open to for the first time. “It’s a thrill to receive the award because the board and staff work so hard. And it also means a lot to our donors. If you want to make a difference for children, that report helps (our organization’s) thinking come to life.

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Canada's non-profit and voluntary sector is the second-largest in the world after The Netherlands. There are 170,000 non-profits and charities in Canada; 54% are run entirely by volunteers. Two million people are employed by non-profit organizations.