

South Oakland Shelter and Lighthouse announce merger

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Social service agencies [South Oakland Shelter](#) and [Lighthouse of Oakland County](#) announced a merger Monday morning, with CEO Ryan Hertz of SOS becoming the acting leader of Lighthouse while plans are finalized. Both organizations focus on fighting homelessness and poverty and promoting self-sufficiency. SOS, founded in 1985, is based in [Lathrup Village](#). Lighthouse, founded in 1972, is in Pontiac.

Hertz said the name of the new organization is still to be determined. The staffs of both — 24 people at SOS, 21 at the financially struggling Lighthouse — will continue in their roles, and there are no current plans to alter programs.

"Of course, we hope there will be some efficiencies," said Hertz, 38. "That doesn't mean reductions. We believe we'll probably need more people in the not-too-distant future ... A person wearing four hats now might be wearing only two."

Similarly, he said, there should be no reductions in facilities: "We want to be accessible to the entire county."

SOS owns its office in Lathrup Village, which contains a computer lab, laundry and showers for its homeless clientele, and is developing 64 apartments with a community center in Oak Park. Partnering with 67 congregations, it provides 11,000 nights of shelter per year.

Lighthouse has 70 housing units in Pontiac spread among four developments, along with nine single family homes. It operates food pantries in Pontiac and Clarkston that serve more than 28,500 people annually.

Hertz said he'll spend time at all the facilities rather than be tethered to one, and that he will report to both boards, which will ultimately be combined. The alliance grew out of a phone call several months ago from Hertz to Lighthouse CEO Rick David, whose planned departure after 3½ years took place Thursday.

"It became clear there was so much we could be doing together," Hertz said. "Once you get past the crisis points, we're serving the same population."

With endowments and real estate holdings, Lighthouse is the larger organization financially, reporting \$7 million in assets to \$1.35 million for SOS. But IRS filings show a smaller gap in revenue for 2017 — Lighthouse took in \$3.35 million, SOS \$2.3 million — and while SOS finished with a surplus of \$295,000, Lighthouse reported a net loss of \$603,000. That followed a net loss of \$372,000 in 2016.

"Long-term," said Lighthouse board chair John Townsend in a prepared statement, "we look forward to a stronger combined organization that improves the quality of services we provide, expands our service area and streamlines operations. This is a win-win-win for SOS, Lighthouse and the entire community."

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