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by Catholic News Service

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Marriottsville, Md. — February 22, 2018
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Maryland-based Bon Secours Health System and Mercy Health, with headquarters in Ohio, plan to merge by the end of the year, forming one of the country's largest health systems.

The merger of the two Catholic health care systems will create a network of 43 hospitals, hundreds of clinics and care sites, and housing ministries that spans seven states from Ohio to the East Coast.

In announcing the merger Feb. 21, officials of both health care entities said they expect health care to improve while continuing to offer low-cost quality care for patients.

"As consumers grapple with the implications of health care reform in a dynamic marketplace, Mercy Health and Bon Secours share a vision to improve the health of the communities we serve as the low-cost, high-value provider, John M. Starcher Jr., Mercy Health president and CEO, said in a news release.

"Working together, our strong faith-based heritage fuels our mutual focus to provide efficient and effective health care for each patient who comes through our doors," he said.

Richard J. Statuto, president and CEO at Bon Secours, said the merger was possible because the mission, vision, values and geographic service areas align with and complement each other.

"This merger strengthens our shared commitment to improve population health, eliminate health disparities, build strength to address social determinants of health and invest heavily in innovating our approaches to health care," Statuto said in the release.

The merger will create the fifth largest Catholic health system in the U.S, the announcement said, and will lead to reduced costs for health care while allowing resources and staffs to integrate across the various ministries of both health systems.

Hospital officials in both corporations also expect to strengthen service to people most in need of health care.

The health systems will have a combined $8 billion in net operating revenue and $293 million in operating income.

The new operation will have more than 57,000 associates and more than 2,100 physicians and advanced- practice clinicians.

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Bon Secours is a not-for-profit health system sponsored by Bon Secours Ministries and founded by the Sisters of Bon Secours. With headquarters in Marriottsville, it has facilities in Florida, Kentucky, Maryland, New York, South Carolina and Virginia. It owns, manages or has joint ventures in 20 hospitals and 27 post-acute care sites including nursing facilities, assisted-living operations, and home care and hospice services. It also has developed more than 800 affordable-housing units for low-income families.

Mercy Health, based in in Cincinnati, is the largest health system in Ohio and also operates hospitals in Kentucky. It provides care in nearly 500 facilities. It operates 23 hospitals and 26 post-acute care facilities including senior living communities, hospice programs and home health agencies.

An earlier version of this post incorrectly included a photo of Mercy Hospital Jefferson in Missouri. That hospital is not part of the planned merger.