RATING ACTION COMMENTARY

Fitch Affirms Advocate Aurora Health's (IL) IDR at 'AA'; Outlook Stable

Mon 02 Aug, 2021 - 11:49 AM ET

Fitch Ratings - Chicago - 02 Aug 2021: Fitch Ratings has affirmed Advocate Aurora Health's (AAH) Issuer Default Rating (IDR) at 'AA'. Fitch has also affirmed the outstanding revenue bonds issued by the Wisconsin Health and Educational Facilities Authority, Illinois Finance Authority, and Illinois Health Facilities Authority on behalf of AAH as well as taxable fixed-rate bonds issued directly by AAH at 'AA'. Finally, AAH's 'F1+' Short-Term Rating on variable rate debt and CP debt supported by AAH's self-liquidity has been affirmed.

The Rating Outlook is Stable.

SECURITY

Bonds are unsecured joint and several obligations of the obligated group, which consists of the vast majority of AAH hospitals, the AAH parent, and the Advocate Health Care Network and AAH physician practices.

ANALYTICAL CONCLUSION

AAH's 'AA' IDR rating is driven by the system's very strong financial profile assessment, leading market position over a broad and diversified service area covering the population centers of two states, and expectations for a return to strong operating margins over time, as Fitch believes the system's fundamental operating platform remains strong.

The 'F1+' Short-Term Rating is based on AAH maintaining a Long-Term Rating of at least 'AA-' as well as adequate internal liquidity and written procedures consistent with Fitch's criteria. AAH has "eligible" discounted cash, U.S. Treasuries, municipal bonds, and corporate bonds in excess of 125% of its maximum self-liquidity funding exposure for assignment of the 'F1+' rating.

KEY RATING DRIVERS

Revenue Defensibility: 'bbb'
Largest Health System in Two States; Competition Present in Key Markets

AAH is the largest health system in both Illinois and Wisconsin with a broad market reach operating in multiple markets across the major population centers of both states. The system benefits from a generally favorable payor mix.

Operating Risk: 'a'

Track-Record of Strong Operating Results; Margins Expected to Continue to Rebound

AAH’s operating risk profile remains strong. The system has a track-record of generating an operating EBITDA margin in the 10% range. Fitch expects long-term margins should be consistent with a strong assessment, despite financial pressure presented over the last year by the coronavirus pandemic. Capital spending plans are elevated but manageable.

Financial Profile: ‘aa’

Strong Capital-Related Ratios

AAH’s financial profile is strong. Capital-related ratios should remain strong in Fitch's forward-looking scenario analysis, even in a stress case.

ASYMMETRIC ADDITIONAL RISK CONSIDERATIONS

There are no asymmetric risk factors identified with AAH's rating.

RATING SENSITIVITIES

Factors that could, individually or collectively, lead to positive rating action/upgrade:

--Sustained improvement in operating EBITDA margin consistently above 10%;

--Considerable growth in unrestricted cash levels leading to superlative cash-to-adjusted debt.

Factors that could, individually or collectively, lead to negative rating action/downgrade:

--Unexpectedly prolonged compression in operating margins, such that the operating EBITDA margin is expected to remain at 7% or lower for a sustained period beyond what Fitch currently expects, which would lead to an operating
risk profile more consistent with a midrange assessment;

--Weaker balance sheet metrics, leading to thinner capital-related ratios in the long term, more consistent with an 'a' assessment, particularly if compounded with an above-mentioned sustained weakening of operating EBITDA margin.

BEST/WORST CASE RATING SCENARIO

International scale credit ratings of Sovereigns, Public Finance and Infrastructure issuers have a best-case rating upgrade scenario (defined as the 99th percentile of rating transitions, measured in a positive direction) of three notches over a three-year rating horizon; and a worst-case rating downgrade scenario (defined as the 99th percentile of rating transitions, measured in a negative direction) of three notches over three years. The complete span of best- and worst-case scenario credit ratings for all rating categories ranges from 'AAA' to 'D'. Best- and worst-case scenario credit ratings are based on historical performance. For more information about the methodology used to determine sector-specific best- and worst-case scenario credit ratings, visit https://www.fitchratings.com/site/re/10111579.

CREDIT PROFILE

AAH is the result of the April 2018 merger between Advocate Health Care (IL) (Advocate) and Aurora Health Care (WI) (Aurora). The system includes 24 acute care hospitals and one behavioral health hospital (totaling more than 5,100 staffed beds), approximately 3,600 employed physicians, and operates roughly 500 outpatient locations and 100 retail clinics in contiguous markets stretching from the Chicago metro area north through Milwaukee, to Marinette, WI in the north. AAH is the largest healthcare provider in both Illinois and Wisconsin. Combined, AAH recorded more than $13 billion in operating revenue in audited fiscal 2020 (Dec. 31 year-end).

A system of AAH’s size and scope of operations is constantly evaluating its portfolio of assets. Most recently, in 2020 the system sold two central Illinois hospitals (the former Advocate BroMenn Medical Center in Normal, IL and Advocate Eureka) to the Carle Foundation (AA-).

REVENUE DEFENSIBILITY

AAH’s payor mix is well under the 25% threshold for a midrange assessment. Combined Medicaid and self-pay consistently account for approximately 17% of gross revenue (including 17.5% in fiscal 2020). Illinois expanded Medicaid under the Affordable Care Act (ACA), while Wisconsin did not expand Medicaid under the ACA guidelines, the state did expand eligibility in prior years.

AAH operates in multiple markets covering a contiguous service area stretching from northeastern Illinois (Chicago area) through Milwaukee to northeastern Wisconsin. AAH is the market share leader in both states. Despite the leading position, the system operates in many competitive service areas, notably Chicago (where AAH is the market leader in a crowded market) and Milwaukee, the population hubs of the combined service area. AAH's largest competitor is Ascension Health (AA+), which also operates multiple facilities in both the Milwaukee and Chicago markets. AAH also has one of the largest and most sophisticated physician integration models in the industry with broad population health management capabilities, including employing approximately 3,600 physicians, and nearly three million unique lives.
AAH operates in varying service area demographic profiles, as expected from a large and geographically diverse health system. AAH's service area characteristics are generally stable supporting a midrange assessment. Much of suburban Chicago (e.g., Lake County), suburban Milwaukee, and other markets such as Brown County, WI (Green Bay) demonstrate generally favorable characteristics such as median household income levels in-line with or better than the national average and low poverty rates. Fitch does not expect AAH’s payor mix to change materially in the near term.

**OPERATING RISK**

AAH has a track-record of strong operating margins, with the operating EBITDA margin averaging 10.1% between fiscals 2016 and 2019. The margin compressed to 7.3% in fiscal 2020, as the system contended with the coronavirus pandemic. These results do not include nonrecurring operating expenses in recent years (e.g., early retirement incentive plans, one-time Epic EMR upgrade/installation costs, and one-time merger costs, etc.).

Management estimates that the pandemic cost AAH approximately $900 million in fiscal 2020 in terms of revenue loss and increased PPE costs, not to mention added labor costs and other disruptions. These pressures were balanced in part by the receipt of $847 million of CARES Act and related stimulus funding grants (which AAH recorded in 2020).

Despite the considerable challenges presented by the coronavirus pandemic, Fitch expects that long term the system maintains a robust operating platform and margins will return to a level consistent with a strong operating risk profile, with an operating EBITDA margin in the 9% range. Management has budgeted an operating margin of approximately 2.2% in fiscal 2021, which would translate to an operating EBITDA margin in the 7.5% range. In fiscal Q12021, AAH recorded an operating margin of 2.0% and operating EBITDA margin of 7.1% (excluding nonrecurring expenses of approximately $13 million).

Fitch expects AAH’s capital spending will continue at a measured pace. The system has nearly $1.3 billion in capex budgeted for fiscal 2021, which translates to a capital spending ratio of more than 2x. Beyond that, management expects to maintain a capital spending ratio of around 1.5x. Fitch expects, however, that under a strained economic or operating environment AAH would defer or cut capex, as the system did during the early months of the pandemic and related economic recession in 2020.

Key projects are aligned with AAH's Transformation 2025 strategy, and include continued expansion of AAH's ambulatory network with a focus on consumer-driven access, as well as upgrades in certain markets. AAH has maintained a healthy pace of capex in recent years, as the capital spending ratio averaged approximately 1.3x over the last five years, and the average age of plant measured a comfortable 9.2 years at FYE 2020.

While AAH does not have formal new money debt plans in the near term, Fitch expects a system of AAH's size and scale to access the capital markets from time-to-time. Also, in September 2020 the system increased the authorization of its CP program to a maximum amount of $1 billion, although only $50 million was outstanding as of March 31, 2021.

**FINANCIAL PROFILE**


4/10
AAH’s financial profile is strong in the context of the system’s midrange revenue defensibility and strong operating risk profile assessments. Capital-related ratios should remain strong in Fitch’s forward-looking analysis, even in a stress case.

AAH has nearly $3.9 billion of debt outstanding, inclusive of operating leases (which are now captured on the balance sheet). Unrestricted cash and investments measured almost $10.5 billion at FYE 2020.

AAH’s debt equivalents are manageable. AAH has two frozen defined benefit (DB) pension plans. The plans combined were approximately $200 million underfunded compared to a projected benefit obligation (PBO) of roughly $2.6 billion at FYE 2020, translating to a funded ratio of 92%. Because the pension plan is more than 80% funded, Fitch does not include the underfunded status in calculating adjusted debt, and as a result AAH’s adjusted debt is equal to its direct debt. AAH’s net adjusted debt (adjusted debt minus unrestricted cash and investments) is favorably negative, measuring -$6.6 billion at FYE 2020. Fitch expects net adjusted debt to remain favorably negative in the coming years, even in the stress case of Fitch’s scenario analysis.

Per Fitch’s forward-looking scenario analysis, AAH’s capital-related ratios should be consistent with the broad ‘AA’ category, even in a stress case. Based on fiscal 2020 results, AAH’s net adjusted debt-to-adjusted EBITDA was favorably negative at better than negative 4x and cash-to-adjusted debt was about 270% at FYE 2020. Looking forward, net adjusted debt-to-adjusted EBITDA is negative in every year of the scenario analysis, including the stress case, and cash-to-adjusted debt never drops below 270% in the base case or 230% in the stress case.

The ‘F1+’ short-term rating is based on AAH maintaining a long-term rating of at least ‘AA-’. AAH maintains sufficient discounted internal liquid resources (composed of cash, U.S. Treasuries, municipal bonds, and corporate bonds) and has implemented written procedures to fund any un-remarked put on the $1.2 billion of theoretical maximum potential debt supported by self-liquidity. AAH’s self-liquidity supported demand debt is comprised of its puttable VRDO bonds not supported by standby bond purchase agreements (SBPAs) as well as the $1 billion maximum authorized under the taxable CP program (increased from a maximum of $500 million in September 2020, although only $50 million was outstanding as of March 31, 2021). AAH had “eligible” cash, U.S. Treasuries, municipal bonds and corporate bonds in excess of the 125% threshold of its maximum self-liquidity funding exposure for assignment of the ‘F1+’ rating.

ASYMMETRIC ADDITIONAL RISK CONSIDERATIONS

There are no asymmetric risk factors associated with AAH’s rating.

The senior management team is deep and is comprised of members of both the legacy Advocate and Aurora systems. AAH added a new Chief Strategy Officer in spring 2021, and the former CSO is now the President of the system’s AAH Enterprises. The system also appointed a new Chief Government Relations Officer in 2020. No significant senior management retirements are planned in the near term, although the board is engaged on succession planning.

AAH has nearly $3.9 billion of debt outstanding (including operating leases). The system has a CP program in place and other variable rate debt supported by internal liquidity. Most VRDO bonds are supported by SBPAs, which expire between January 2024 and September 2025. Maximum annual debt service (MADS) is approximately $227 million, based on smoothing debt service (actual MADS is just over $820 million, based on a bullet payment in 2050). MADS coverage based on fiscal 2020 results is strong at approximately 6x and does not pose an asymmetric risk. The MTI includes a minimum historical debt service coverage covenant of 1.10x.
AAH had just over 310 days cash on hand at FYE 2020 and just over 315 days at unaudited March 31, 2021 (excluding Medicare advance payment funds and deferred employer FICA tax), and therefore days cash does not pose an asymmetric risk.

In addition to the sources of information identified in Fitch’s applicable criteria specified below, this action was informed by information from Lumesis.

REFERENCES FOR SUBSTANTIALLY MATERIAL SOURCE CITED AS KEY DRIVER OF RATING

The principal sources of information used in the analysis are described in the Applicable Criteria.

ESG CONSIDERATIONS

Unless otherwise disclosed in this section, the highest level of ESG credit relevance is a score of ‘3’. This means ESG issues are credit-neutral or have only a minimal credit impact on the entity, either due to their nature or the way in which they are being managed by the entity. For more information on Fitch’s ESG Relevance Scores, visit www.fitchratings.com/esg

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FITCH RATINGS ANALYSTS

Mark Pascaris
Director
Primary Rating Analyst
+1 312 368 3135

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