

debt obligations. Financial strength ratings are specific to each individual insurance subsidiary and reflect each rating agency's view of the overall financial strength (capital levels, earnings, growth, investments, business mix, operating performance, and market position) of the insuring entity and its ability to meet its obligations to policyholders. Both the issuer credit ratings and financial strength ratings incorporate quantitative and qualitative analyses by rating agencies and are routinely reviewed and updated on an ongoing basis.

Rating agencies assign an outlook statement of "positive," "negative," or "developing" to indicate an intermediate-term trend in credit fundamentals which could lead to a rating change. "Positive" means that a rating may be raised, "negative" means that a rating may be lowered, and "developing" means that a rating may be raised or lowered with equal probability. Alternatively, a rating may have a "stable" outlook to indicate that the rating is not expected to change.

"Credit watch" or "under review" highlights the potential direction of a short-term or long-term rating. It focuses on identifiable events and short-term trends that cause a rating to be placed under heightened surveillance by a rating agency. Events that may trigger this action include mergers, acquisitions, recapitalizations, regulatory actions, criteria changes, or operating developments. Ratings may be placed on credit watch or under review when an event or a change in an expected trend occurs and additional information is needed to evaluate the current rating level. This status does not mean that a rating change is inevitable, and ratings may change without first being placed on a watch list. A rating is not a recommendation to buy, sell, or hold securities and may be subject to revision or withdrawal at any time by the rating agency. Each rating should be evaluated independently of any other rating.

See "Management's Discussion and Analysis of Financial Condition and Results of Operations - Ratings" contained herein in Item 7 for our current outlook, issuer credit, and financial strength ratings. See also further discussion in "Risk Factors" contained herein in Item 1A.

Competition

There is significant competition among insurance companies for the types of products we sell, particularly in the voluntary benefits market. We are operating in a dynamic competitive environment of both traditional and non-traditional competitors, with changes in product offerings, enrollment services, and technology solutions. We believe that the principal competitive factors affecting our business are price, quality of the customer experience regarding service and claims management, integrated product choices, enrollment capabilities, financial strength ratings, claims-paying ratings, and a solution to allow our customers to comply with the changing laws and regulations related to family medical leave benefits.

In the individual and group disability markets, we compete in the United States with a number of major companies and regionally with other companies offering specialty products. Our principal competitors for our other products, including group life and the product offerings sold to groups of employees through payroll deduction, include the largest insurance companies in the United States. Some of these companies have more competitive pricing or have higher claims-paying ratings. Some may also have greater financial resources with which to compete.

In the United Kingdom and Poland, where we sell both individual and group products, we compete with a mix of large internationally recognized providers and strong local carriers.

All areas of the employee benefits markets are highly competitive due to the yearly renewable term nature of our products and the large number of insurance companies offering products in this market. There is a risk that our customers may be able to obtain more favorable terms or improved technology solutions from competitors in lieu of renewing coverage with us. The effect of competition may, as a result, adversely affect the persistency of these and other products, as well as our ability to sell products in the future.

We must attract and retain independent agents and brokers to actively market our products. Strong competition exists among insurers for agents and brokers. We compete with other insurers for sales agents and brokers primarily on the basis of our product offerings, financial strength, support services, and compensation. Sales of our products could be materially adversely affected if we are unsuccessful in attracting and retaining agents and brokers.

For further discussion, refer to "Risk Factors" contained herein in Item 1A.