

## REYAAS Case Study

Marisa Shenk and Kelly Nye-Lengerman

# Life Management Assistance Program (LifeMAP)

### Research Support Services for Employment of Young Adults on the Autism Spectrum (REYAAS)

**Project.** REYAAS identifies promising practices and policies to support the employment of young adults (ages 16 to 28) on the autism spectrum. The project is funded by the Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP) within the U.S. Department of Labor. Mathematica leads the project in partnership with ODEP. More information is available on the [project web page](#).

The purpose of this case study is to provide information about LifeMAP to the federal government, researchers, state government agencies, autism-related organizations, young adults with autism, service providers, and others. LifeMAP is a coaching program that holds promise for supporting the employment of young people on the autism spectrum.

## The LifeMAP model

### What is LifeMAP?

LifeMAP is a one-on-one coaching program that helps people on the autism spectrum identify and work toward goals (see Figure 1, below), including attaining and retaining employment. The Association for Autism and Neurodiversity (AANE) developed the LifeMAP program in 2008

in Watertown, Massachusetts, to address a gap in life-skills coaching for autistic adults who do not qualify for Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) services based on intellectual disability. Since then, AANE has altered LifeMAP's language, online availability, and the program's integration with mental health, but has retained LifeMAP's original philosophy and approach. As of 2024, LifeMAP has served more than 3,000 people.

Figure 1. The LifeMAP process



## What services are provided?

Professional coaches meet with LifeMAP clients one-on-one to provide intensive coaching. Clients and coaches work together to identify goals that are relevant to clients' lives and develop steps toward reaching their goals. Rather than working through a traditional classroom setting or structured curriculum, clients and coaches work in individual sessions, typically meeting once a week for an hour, over a period of 8–10 weeks, at which point the client may request a new contract. On average, privately-funded clients receive weekly coaching for about six months (see "How are services funded?" below), while those who have third-party funds receive coaching over a longer period. Coaches and clients co-develop a monthly report that describes goals, accomplishments, and challenges. The coach also works with the client to complete an anxiety and confidence self-assessment and describe the client's progress toward goal attainment at the beginning, middle, and end of the coaching contract. Some clients may move from awareness to strategy

development by the end of their contract, and others may progress to applying their strategies with help or independently.

Clients might seek support from their coach to address specific needs, such as questions about high school transition, managing stress in college, job search strategies, practicing for an interview, or support to help retain and progress in their jobs. They might work on applying for jobs, preparing for interviews, self-regulation strategies, networking, identifying work environments that align with their strengths, or navigating workplace culture. Many clients work on other goals that have both work and personal benefits—such as social, self-care, education, and executive-functioning goals—but that also prepare them for entering or remaining in the workforce. Clients may also participate in an optional 10-session intensive job interview training program. Although the curriculum does not necessarily include all employment topics, clients may add those relevant to them.

**Figure 2. Common circumstances of LifeMAP clients\***



### Alex

- Alex is a 19 year old autistic adult who started taking college classes but did not complete a degree.
- Alex's father noted that she was overwhelmed by managing academics, social life, transportation, and communication with professors on her own.
- Her parents encouraged her to connect with a LifeMAP coach to help her find work because she was feeling stuck.
- Together, Alex and her coach Sarah worked to identify Alex's strengths and next steps, such as exploring what types of jobs she was open to through online searches or informational interviews.
- To manage stress, Sarah helped Alex identify tools for emotional regulation and referred her to a therapist.



### Billie

- Billie was a college senior on the autism spectrum who had good grades and was seeking a job after graduation when he sought out LifeMAP services.
- He was worried that his resume was not competitive; he did not have previous work experience such as internships or after-school jobs.
- Billie worked with his coach Quinn to develop a goal to submit a resume to two jobs per week and practice interview skills.
- Throughout their sessions, Quinn helped Billie explore his strengths, identify skills that could fulfill job requirements, and develop strategies for answering interview questions about past experiences (such as drawing on his school experience).

\* Note: Alex and Billie are fictional characters who represent young adult LifeMAP clients.

### Who does LifeMAP serve?

LifeMAP serves more than 850 autistic clients at any given time through more than 90 trained coaches. In 2020, the average age of LifeMAP clients was 26, approximately 80 percent reported they were White, and 75 percent reported they were male (Hillier et al. 2021). To enroll in LifeMAP, clients must complete an intake interview and be able to independently discuss their goals for coaching. Based on the interview, the potential client and coach may decide that the program is a good fit and the client can benefit from it. However, if the client has other active barriers to coaching—for example, the potential client cannot independently communicate their goals and interests, or is experiencing a mental health crisis—LifeMAP coaching may not be appropriate at that time.

### Who provides services?

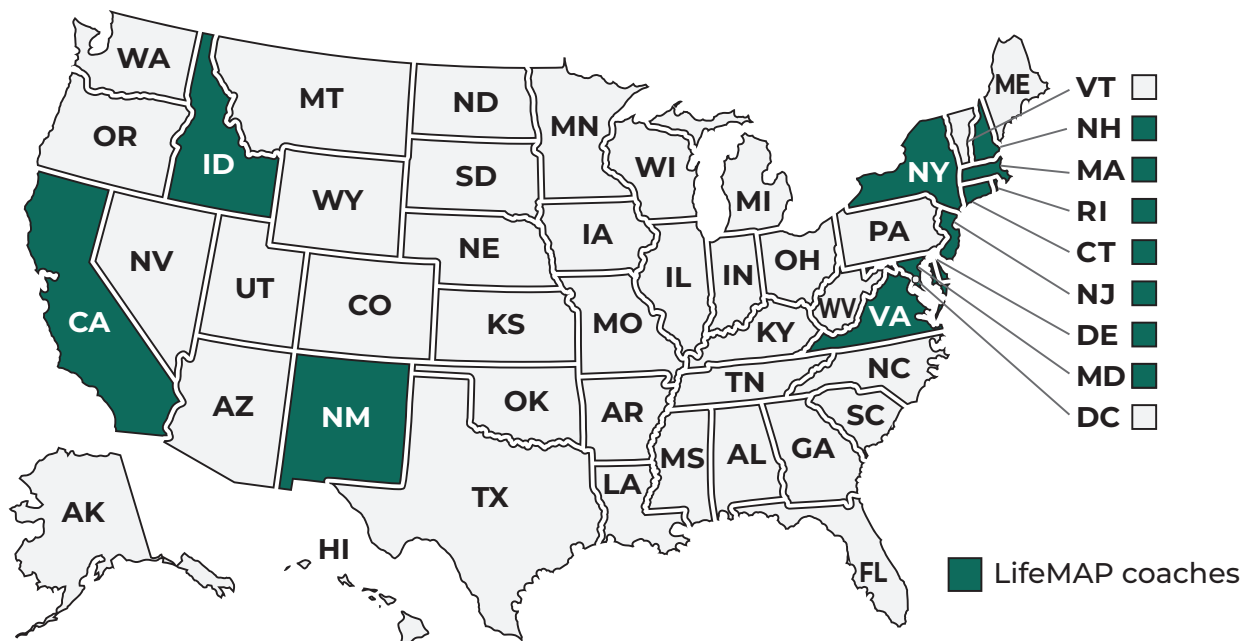
Ninety percent of LifeMAP coaches have a graduate degree in fields such as psychology, counseling,

occupational training, and special education (Hillier et al. 2021). Caseloads vary from five to 20 clients, and many coaches have separate full-time jobs. Coaches are paid an hourly rate plus a fixed amount for administrative time, though most of their work takes place during the session with clients (e.g., cocreating notes and monthly reports). LifeMAP provides coaches with 10 hours of reading material, four hours of individual orientation and training, and weekly meetings with coach supervisors, as well as a monthly “clinical hour” with other coaches and clinical staff and paid monthly skill-building workshops (Hillier et al., 2021).

### Where are services offered?

LifeMAP provides in-person and hybrid services in New England and New York. Some LifeMAP coaches provide services in other states. Currently, coaches in California and Virginia offer in-person LifeMAP services, while coaches in other states offer services virtually. (See Figure 3, below.)

**Figure 3. LifeMAP’s service and coach network**



## How are services funded?

The majority of LifeMAP clients reside in Massachusetts and are eligible to receive funding from the Massachusetts Department of Developmental Services, which contracts with AANE to provide services and reimburses AANE on a fee-for-service basis. As of 2025, about half of all LifeMAP clients were funded through this source.

In addition, autistic clients enrolled in VR in Massachusetts or New Hampshire can receive job placement services through VR and a referral to LifeMAP for either preemployment or job-retention coaching.

Approximately 42 percent of LifeMAP clients pay privately for their services, generally meaning family members are paying if not the clients themselves, including those who live in other states and receive services virtually. Clients can also receive aid through schools or private corporations.

## Lessons learned: Perspectives of LifeMAP staff



### Understanding community needs and individual goals

Before the creation of LifeMAP, AANE had already been serving autistic adults in this region, and this experience helped identify the population of autistic adults who had unmet needs. When LifeMAP launched in 2008, it reported a high level of local interest in coaching services and continued interest in making coaching services available to people outside its service area.

LifeMAP staff reported that a key to the model's success was its person-centered approach to goal setting and collaboration. Coaches work with clients to find steps that are helpful to them and expect clients to actively participate during coaching sessions and complete activities in between sessions. Coaches reported that focusing on the client's goals, rather than a teacher's, coach's, or parent's goals, resulted in stronger buy-in and engagement from the client (Hillier et al. 2021).



## Importance of funding sources

Staff noted that launching as a fee-for-service program allowed flexibility as they developed the program, since they were not obligated to a grant or funder's requirements, which typically prohibit a fee-for-service structure. Although grant funding could make services more widely available, partnering with state agencies allowed LifeMAP to serve many clients without barriers based on an individual's ability to pay.

Conversely, LifeMAP staff have found it difficult to establish funding through other state agencies to expand the program in other states. As vendors for state agencies, LifeMAP also may have different views on intensity or duration of services to support a client toward achieving or realizing their goals than the state agencies themselves.



## Sharing knowledge is key to supporting coaches

Staff noted training and peer learning are key factors that equip coaches to help clients achieve their goals. AANE provides Intensive Autism Coaching Training, an in-person certificate program, and clinical support to human services professionals and life coaches interested in working with autistic clients outside of the New England area. About 10 to 15 coaches go through the training each year, making use of experience gained by LifeMAP coaches. Coaches also gain membership to the Autism Professional Coaching Association, which meets monthly, as well as other professional development opportunities (Hillier et al., 2021).

## Research on LifeMAP

Although LifeMAP has not undergone rigorous evaluation for effectiveness, descriptive analyses and anecdotal evidence indicate that it holds promise for improving employment outcomes of adults on the autism spectrum.

Hillier et al. (2022) conducted an analysis of 264 LifeMAP clients who were working on goals between January 2016 to June 2020 and found that clients



received coaching services for almost six months on average; about half of clients worked on one goal at a time, and some worked on up to four goals. Additionally, 28 percent had an employment goal such as retaining employment, finding job openings, and practicing for interviews. Another 15 percent had education goals, and 20 percent had independent living goals. Approximately 10 percent had regulation, communication, or self-awareness goals, which could also support employment indirectly, such as staying calm at work, making phone calls without anxiety, or creating healthier expectations of their own performance. LifeMAP clients reported a reduction in anxiety and an increase in confidence between goal development and their final goal report.

From the beginning of the program, LifeMAP developers worked with university partners to analyze their data and guide decision-making. One of their partners, MassAbility, shared that among their 170 clients referred to LifeMAP in 2023, there were 40 job placements, and of clients who closed their cases 94 percent had a successful employment outcome. MassAbility clients who became employed after being referred to LifeMAP on average worked more than 23 hours per week and earned more than \$19 per hour. In comparison, among all young adults on the autism spectrum receiving VR services in 2017-2019, about half with closed cases had a successful employment outcome. On average, this group worked about 23 hours per week and earned \$10 per hour (Shenk et al. 2024).

.....

**Information sources**

This case study draws on interviews with LifeMAP staff and former clients, written materials provided by LifeMAP staff, and published journal articles. The REYAAS team shared a draft of the case study with LifeMAP and incorporated revisions for accuracy and completeness.

You can learn more about the LifeMAP program at: <https://aane.org/services-programs/one-to-one-services/coaching-for-adults-teens/>▲

.....

**References**

Hillier, A., N. Poto, D. Schena II, A. Buckingham, and A. Frye. “An Individualized Life-Skills Coaching Program for Adults with Autism.” *Advances in Autism*, vol. 8, no. 2, 2022, pp. 104-116.

Hillier, A., N. Poto, D. Schena, J. Dorey, A. Buckingham, M. Santangelo, and A. Frye. “Overview of a Life Skills Coaching Program for Adults on the Autism Spectrum: Coaches’ Perspectives.” *Psychological Reports*, vol. 125, no. 2, 2022, pp. 937-963.

Shenk, M., A. Harnack-Eber, A. Patnaik, and Y. Ben-Shalom. “Autistic Young Adults’ Vocational Rehabilitation Service Use, Characteristics, and Employment Outcomes from 2017 to 2020.” *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation*, 2024.

This brief was prepared for the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL), Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP) by Mathematica, under contract number 1605DC-18-A-0020. The views expressed are those of the author and should not be attributed to DOL, nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement of same by the U.S. Government. More information about the REYAAS project, including the data analysis, is available on the [project’s web page](#).