🇺🇸 **A Veteran-to-Veteran Guide**

OCALA & MARION COUNTY · 2026 EDITION

The Veteran's Guide to Buying a Home With Your VA Loan

Everything you need to use the benefit you earned: eligibility, your COE, entitlement, the funding fee, closing costs, and every step to the closing table. In plain language.

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"I don't just find homes, I engineer your wealth."

What's inside

> If you served, you earned one of the best financial tools in the country: the VA home loan. Used right, it lets you buy a home in Ocala with no money down, no monthly mortgage insurance, and terms most buyers can't touch. Used wrong, or not at all, it leaves money on the table.

I wrote this guide because too many Veterans in Marion County either don't know what their benefit can do, or get talked into a worse loan by someone who doesn't understand it. I served, and I do this for a living here in Ocala. This is the plain version, no fluff.

01 · The VA loan, and why it's powerful

The VA doesn't lend you money directly. You still go through a private lender, a bank, mortgage company, or credit union. What the VA does is **guarantee a portion of the loan**, promising the lender it will cover part of the balance if you ever default. That guaranty lowers the lender's risk, which is why they can offer you terms the general public doesn't get.

The program was created by the original G.I. Bill in 1944. Since Fiscal Year 2020 alone, the VA has guaranteed more than 3.8 million loans, and more than 28 million since it began. It's one of the most successful lending programs in history.

What makes it worth using

- **Typically no down payment** with full entitlement (as long as the loan doesn't exceed the appraised value).
- **No private mortgage insurance (PMI)** or MIP. Conventional and FHA buyers pay this every month. You don't.
- **No loan limit** with full entitlement, if you meet your lender's financial guidelines.
- **Competitively low interest rates** versus other programs.
- **No minimum credit score from the VA** (individual lenders may set their own).
- **A lifetime benefit**, usable more than once, and in some cases more than one VA loan at a time.
- **No funding fee** for eligible service-connected disabled Veterans and certain surviving spouses.

> **OCALA REALITY CHECK**
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> With full entitlement there's no cap on your loan size in Marion County, only what a lender approves and what the home appraises for. Jumbo purchases over $1 million are possible for qualified buyers with lenders who offer them.

The program offers several loan options: the **Purchase Loan** (most common), the **Interest Rate Reduction Refinancing Loan (IRRRL / streamline refi)**, the **Cash-Out Refinance**, the **Native American Direct Loan (NADL)** for eligible buyers on federal trust land, plus add-ons like **Adapted Housing Grants** and the **Energy Efficient Mortgage (EEM)**.

02 · Are you eligible?

Eligibility comes down to your **service history and duty status**. In general, the benefit may be available to:

- Veterans who meet service requirements
- Active-duty service members
- National Guard and Reserve members (activated, and in some cases non-activated with enough qualifying service)
- Certain surviving spouses, if the Veteran died on active duty, died from a service-connected disability, or (in some cases) died after being rated totally disabled

The three factors that determine eligibility are **U.S. military service, service dates and duration, and discharge status**. The fastest way to confirm you qualify is to have a VA-experienced lender pull your Certificate of Eligibility during pre-approval, often done in minutes (it used to take over 26 days back in 2015).

03 · Your Certificate of Eligibility (COE)

The COE confirms to a lender that you qualify, and shows your entitlement amount. Getting it is the first real step.

Three ways to request a COE

1. **Online** using the digital VA Form 26-1880 (about 15 minutes; sign in with a verified Login.gov or ID.me account).
2. **Through your lender**, who can often pull it instantly through the VA's Web LGY system. Usually the fastest route.
3. **By mail**, using VA Form 26-1880 sent to your regional loan center (slowest).

What you'll need, by service type

- **Veteran:** a copy of your discharge or separation papers (DD214).
- **Active-duty:** a signed statement of service with your name, SSN, date of birth, date entered duty, any lost time, and the command providing it.
- **Activated Guard/Reserve:** your DD214 or other discharge documents.
- **Never-activated Guard/Reserve:** statements of service or NGB Forms 22 and 23, plus proof of character of service.
- **Surviving spouses:** the Veteran's DD214 if available, plus VA Form 26-1817 (if receiving DIC) or VA Form 21P-534EZ with marriage license and death certificate (if not).

You'll also need your personal info (SSN, date of birth, contact details) and, if you've had a VA loan before, the property addresses and loan dates.

04 · Entitlement & loan limits

Entitlement is the amount the VA guarantees to your lender. Understanding it explains the whole "no down payment" magic.

Basic entitlement

Your COE lists a **basic entitlement**, usually shown as **$36,000**. That's not what you can borrow, it's the maximum the VA pays your lender if you default on a loan of $144,000 or less. For loans above $144,000, the VA guarantees up to **25% of the loan amount**. If your COE shows the full $36,000 basic entitlement, you have **full entitlement**, meaning no loan limit.

Bonus entitlement (tier 2)

Bonus entitlement covers 25% of loans above $144,000. With full entitlement you generally don't calculate anything, your guaranty covers 25% of whatever a lender approves. You only calculate remaining entitlement if you've already used part of it (say, you still own a home bought with a VA loan).

> **IF YOU'VE USED YOUR BENEFIT BEFORE**
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> Remaining bonus entitlement is based on the county loan limit where you're buying, minus what you've used. VA limits match the FHFA conforming "One-Unit Limit." The math: (county One-Unit Limit × 0.25) − entitlement already used = remaining bonus entitlement. Multiply that by 4 for the rough no-down-payment loan amount most lenders will do. Check your county's current limit on the FHFA website; your lender runs your exact numbers.

Even with full entitlement, a lender still has to approve you. They'll size your loan on credit, income, debts, and assets, and the maximum on any property is the appraised value or purchase price, whichever is lower.

05 · The VA funding fee & closing costs

The **VA funding fee** is a one-time payment that keeps the program running at no cost to taxpayers (part of why there's no PMI). You can pay it at closing or roll it into the loan.

WHO'S EXEMPT

You **won't** pay the funding fee if you're receiving VA compensation for a service-connected disability, are eligible for it but receiving retirement/active-duty pay instead, receive DIC as a surviving spouse, have a qualifying pre-discharge claim rating, or are an active-duty member who received a Purple Heart before closing. If you're later awarded disability compensation effective before your closing date, you may be eligible for a refund.

VA-backed purchase loans, funding fee by down payment

Use	Down payment	Funding fee
First use	Less than 5%	2.15%
First use	5% or more	1.5%
First use	10% or more	1.25%
After first use	Less than 5%	3.3%
After first use	5% or more	1.5%
After first use	10% or more	1.25%

Other VA loan funding fees

Loan type	Funding fee
Cash-out refinance, first use	2.15%
Cash-out refinance, after first use	3.3%
Interest Rate Reduction Refinance (IRRRL)	0.5%
Native American Direct Loan (purchase)	1.25%
Loan assumption	0.5%

Funding fee rates effective April 7, 2023. The fee is a percentage of the loan amount, not the purchase price. Example: a first-use buyer putting 5% down on a $200,000 home pays 1.5% of the $190,000 loan, or $2,850.

Who pays closing costs (and the 2024 agent-fee change)

Beyond the funding fee, expect normal closing costs: lender origination (often ~1%), appraisal, title insurance, recording fees, taxes, and hazard insurance. On a purchase loan, **only the funding fee can be rolled into the loan**, the rest are paid at closing. Buyer and seller can **negotiate who pays**. Sellers or builders can credit some or all of your closing costs. VA caps **seller concessions at 4%** of the home's reasonable value.

> **BIG 2024 UPDATE, WORTH KNOWING**
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> After the National Association of REALTORS® settlement, VA Circular 26-24-14 now lets eligible Veterans **pay their own buyer-broker (agent) fees** on contracts executed on or after August 10, 2024, as long as fees are reasonable and customary locally. Previously Veterans couldn't do this at all. You can still ask the seller to cover it, which remains common in VA deals. This is exactly where you want an agent who knows the rule.

06 · Buying a home in Ocala, step by step

1. Get your COE

Confirm eligibility (Section 3). A lender can usually do this fast.

2. Look at your finances & get pre-approved

Review credit, income, debts, and budget, including closing costs. Get pre-approved so sellers take you seriously and you know your real number.

3. Choose a VA-experienced lender

You go through a private lender, not the VA. Shop around, rates and fees vary, and many charge a ~1% origination fee. Some fees are negotiable, ask.

4. Choose a VA-savvy real estate agent

Read every agreement before signing and understand the charges, fees, and your rights in the buyer-agent relationship (especially given the 2024 fee change).

5. Shop and make an offer

Find a home in your range, then sign a purchase agreement. **Make sure it includes the "VA escape clause" (VA option clause)**, which lets you void the contract if the home doesn't appraise for the contract price. Ask about other contingencies too, like a home-inspection contingency.

6. Appraisal & inspection

A VA-approved appraiser confirms the home meets **minimum property requirements (MPRs)** and gives an opinion of value (a **Notice of Value**). An appraisal is *not* a home inspection, get a separate inspection to catch defects. If a home fails an MPR, your lender can discuss a potential waiver.

> **IF THE APPRAISAL COMES IN LOW**
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> You have real options. Request a **Reconsideration of Value (ROV)** with supporting sales data, **renegotiate** the price down to the appraised value, or **pay the difference** at closing. There's also the **Tidewater Initiative**, where an appraiser flags a possible low value early so your agent can submit more sales data before it's finalized. A good agent works these tools for you.

7. Review pre-closing paperwork

Your lender must give you a **Closing Disclosure at least 3 business days before closing**. Read it carefully: loan terms, fees, closing costs, and estimated monthly payment.

8. Close and move in

Closing may happen at a title company, escrow office, or attorney's office. Expect to sign a lot, read before you sign, then take your keys.

07 · Eligible property types

You can use a VA loan to buy a property you'll live in as your residence. Eligible types include:

- Detached single-family home or townhome
- Residential income property (duplex, triplex, fourplex, if you live in one unit and rent the others)
- Condominium (requires pre-approval or a waiver)
- Manufactured home
- New construction / homes under construction (closing on completion)
- An existing home you refinance

> **OCALA ANGLE**
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> The multi-unit rule is a quiet wealth move: buy a duplex or fourplex here, live in one unit, rent the rest, and let tenants help cover your mortgage while you build equity. That's using the benefit to engineer your position, not just to buy a house.

08 · Four myths that cost Veterans money

Myth 1: "VA loans are less competitive than conventional loans."
VA loans offer rates on par with other programs, limited closing costs, and no PMI. Default rates tend to be lower than most government-backed programs. Sellers who understand VA know these buyers are strong.

Myth 2: "A VA loan takes too long to close."
In 2023 the average days to close were: conventional 45, FHA 46, and **VA 32**. VA closings are competitive, often faster.

Myth 3: "VA appraisals take forever and cost more."
In 2023, VA appraisals averaged about seven business days, and 90% of initial VA purchase appraisals met or exceeded the contract price. The VA even allows external data sources and desktop appraisals to speed things up.

Myth 4: "Confirming eligibility is a hassle."
In most cases a lender can pull your COE in a single day. The typical Veteran buyer is a strong borrower: average credit score around 721, gross income over $9,400/month, and nearly $60k in assets.

09 · Protecting your benefit after you buy

Watch out for refinance scams

Once you have a VA loan, you'll get unsolicited "too good to be true" refinance offers, mail that looks like a check or bill, aggressive callers, sometimes a month or two after closing. The VA and CFPB have formally warned Veterans about these. Red flags:

- Promises to "skip" mortgage payments (the VA prohibits advertising this as a way to get cash on an IRRRL).
- Vague "escrow refund" amounts that shrink at closing.
- Low rates advertised with no terms (often a 15-year or adjustable rate, or requiring discount points).
- "No out-of-pocket cost", those costs usually get added to your loan balance.

RULE OF THUMB

Before responding to any refi offer, run the actual numbers and talk to more than one lender, including your current one. If you're pressured, slow down. Reduce these offers by opting out at 888-567-8688 or optoutprescreen.com, and register at donotcall.gov.

If you ever fall behind on payments

Contact your servicer right away, and know the VA has your back. VA loan technicians help even if your loan isn't VA-guaranteed, and if a VA-guaranteed loan goes 61 days past due, the VA automatically assigns a technician. Foreclosure-avoidance options include special forbearance, a repayment plan, a loan modification (including 30-year or 40-year terms), and the VA Partial Claim Program (which pays missed payments to bring the loan current, repaid when you sell or pay off). Reach a VA loan technician at **877-827-3702**. Only work with trusted parties, foreclosure-relief scams target Veterans too.

FLORIDA-SPECIFIC: NATURAL DISASTERS

Hurricane season is real here. If a disaster hits your home: register with FEMA (DisasterAssistance.gov, 800-621-3362) before deadlines, contact your mortgage company (you still owe payments even if the home is uninhabitable, but can ask about forbearance), and file your insurance claim promptly without rushing a settlement. VA encourages servicers to offer a 90-day foreclosure moratorium in declared disaster areas. You can also call VA at 877-827-3702 for a loan specialist.

"I don't just find homes, I engineer your wealth."

From one Veteran to another

Your next step

You've got the map. The fastest way to put it to work in Ocala is a short conversation. I'll confirm your eligibility path, connect you with a VA-experienced lender, and start looking at what your benefit can buy in this market. No pressure, no obligation.

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Call or text: **352-303-9050**

Book a call: calendly.com/cristian-homesinocalaflorida/30min

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