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IN THE HOUSE

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VA Home Loan benefit can make
your dream home a reality**

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Cover Story

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W O U S E

In the

Taking advantage of the VA Home Loan benefit can make your dream home a reality

Tired of on-base housing? You're not alone...but a little-known benefit can help servicemembers, military families, veterans and surviving spouses become homeowners.

The Veterans Administration Home Loan benefit can help military families buy, build or improve a home, or even refinance an existing home loan with either a VA-direct loan or a VA-backed loan through a private lender. And because the VA stands behind the loans, private lenders may offer better terms, including a competitive interest rate, waiving private mortgage insurance, and little or no down payment. In fact, according to the VA Home Loan website, (<https://www.benefits.va.gov/homeloans/>) "nearly 90 percent of all VA-backed home loans are made without a down payment."

Unfortunately, many military families are not aware of this important benefit. "This program is significantly underutilized, and the main reason is awareness. It has historically been that way for over 75 years, with less than 15 percent of our military and veteran population using the program," explains Navy reservist Bryan Bergjans, senior vice president, national director of military and veteran lending with Caliber Home Loans, one of the nation's largest mortgage banking firms. "That's not very many people considering you have 20 million-plus veterans."

Bergjans says the VA Home Loan benefit provides an avenue for military families to become home owners with zero down payment. "This opportunity allows folks with solid base pays and strong housing allowances to purchase quality homes in good neighborhoods," he says. "This comes down to 'awareness' and military and industry organizations doing their part in providing education and resources on the benefit to folks currently serving or getting out of the military."

As a veteran of Operation Enduring Freedom with more than 16 years of military service, Bergjans knows firsthand the challenges faced by military families and the lack of com-



Navy reservist Bryan Bergjans

munication about the Home Loan program. "I have personally discharged twice off active duty—most recently in 2015 after a deployment to Afghanistan—and no one during my transition classes ever talked to me about the VA Home Loan benefit and how I earned it from serving overseas," he recalls, adding, "And that's the case for millions of others who served before me." Bergjans continues to serve today as a supply and logistics officer in the Navy Reserves.

According to the VA, eligibility for the Home Loan benefit is based on length of service or service commitment, duty status and character of service. "I like to remind people that this is an 'earned benefit,'" Bergjans explains, noting that he got involved in the VA Home Loan program in 2008, "when I started having Navy folks approaching me with specific questions regarding the VA Home Loan benefit that they couldn't get answers to from their current

mortgage professional. I quickly learned that both mortgage professionals and service members didn't know much about the benefit, and how to navigate the process.

"Fast forward to 2020, and I have the honor and privilege of being the 'tip of the spear' for military and veteran initiatives at one of the largest mortgage banking firms in the United States," he adds. "Over the last four years, we have been laser-focused on education initiatives for the military, veterans and industry professionals so we can all work together to ensure the dream of homeownership is realized."

Bergjans points out that military families may have 10 days or fewer of house-hunting leave, which means that families, realtors and lenders have to be agile and flexible, and they have to work together to find a home. "I have been blessed to be a part of thousands of stories of home ownership for our military, and I can tell you there is nothing better than families who have become homeowners for the very first time," he says. "The excitement level—and just overall gratefulness—is unmatched."

