



FIRST-TIME HOME BUYER PROGRAMS IN FLORIDA 2026

The Complete Guide — SHIP, Florida Housing, Hometown Heroes,
FHA Loans & Palm Beach County Assistance

Prepared by Aaron Bath
Senior Mortgage Loan Officer | NMLS #2110744
Capital Financial Group Corporation | Jupiter, FL

Welcome from Aaron Bath

As a top-producing mortgage loan officer serving South Florida and Palm Beach County, I've helped hundreds of first-time buyers navigate Florida's excellent assistance programs. These guides give you clear, actionable information so you can make confident decisions and potentially buy with very little out-of-pocket cash. My goal is to be your trusted resource for years to come.

What Counts as a "First-Time Home Buyer" in Florida?

Most programs define a first-time home buyer as someone who has not owned a primary residence in the past three years. This means:

- You may qualify even if you owned a home years ago
- Divorced individuals who haven't owned since the divorce may qualify
- Single parents who previously owned with a spouse may qualify
- Some programs (like Hometown Heroes) do **NOT** require first-time buyer status

Federal Loan Programs for First-Time Buyers

FHA Loans — The Most Popular First-Time Buyer Loan

FHA loans are insured by the Federal Housing Administration and are the most widely used loan program for first-time buyers in Florida. Key benefits:

- **Down payment:** As low as 3.5% with a 580+ credit score
- **Credit score:** 500–579 may qualify with 10% down; 580+ qualifies for 3.5% down
- **Gift funds:** 100% of the down payment can come from gift funds
- **Debt-to-income ratio:** More flexible than conventional loans — up to 57% DTI in some cases
- **Mortgage insurance:** Required for the life of the loan (unless you refinance into conventional later)
- In Palm Beach County, FHA loan limits for 2026 are approximately \$524,225 for a single-family home — covering a large portion of the market, especially in Boynton Beach, Lake Worth, and West Palm Beach.

VA Loans — Zero Down for Veterans

If you've served in the military, a VA loan is almost always the best option available. Benefits include:

- Zero down payment required
- No private mortgage insurance (PMI)
- Competitive interest rates
- No loan limit for eligible veterans with full entitlement
- Seller can pay up to 4% of the purchase price in concessions
- VA loans are not limited to first-time buyers — any eligible veteran can use this benefit multiple times

USDA Loans — Zero Down for Rural Properties

USDA Rural Development loans offer 100% financing for properties in eligible rural and suburban areas. Some areas of Palm Beach County and surrounding counties qualify. Use the USDA eligibility map to check a specific address.

Conventional 97 — 3% Down Conventional Loan

Fannie Mae's HomeReady and Freddie Mac's Home Possible programs allow first-time buyers to put as little as 3% down on a conventional loan. Unlike FHA, mortgage insurance can be removed once you reach 20% equity.

Florida State Programs — Florida Housing Finance Corporation

Florida Housing Finance Corporation (Florida Housing) is the state's housing finance agency. They offer several programs available through participating lenders like CFGC Loans:

Florida First Program

A 30-year fixed-rate FHA, VA, or USDA loan at a below-market interest rate. Can be paired with a \$10,000 down payment assistance second mortgage.

HFA Preferred Program

A 30-year fixed-rate conventional loan with reduced mortgage insurance. Can be paired with a \$10,000 down payment assistance second mortgage.

Florida Hometown Heroes Program

This is one of the most valuable programs available in 2026. It provides up to 5% of the first mortgage loan amount (maximum \$35,000) as a 0%, non-amortizing second mortgage.

- **Who qualifies:** Teachers and school staff, nurses, physicians, and healthcare workers, law enforcement officers, firefighters and EMTs, military veterans and active-duty service members, child care workers, and many other community workforce occupations
- **Income limit:** 150% of AMI for Palm Beach County
- Does **NOT** require first-time buyer status
- Works with FHA, VA, USDA, and Conventional loans
- Must be a Florida resident purchasing a primary residence

■ Hometown Heroes Advantage

Because Hometown Heroes does not require first-time buyer status, it is available to many working professionals who already own a home or have owned in the past three years. This makes it one of the most flexible and valuable programs in Florida for eligible occupations.

Florida SHIP Program & Palm Beach County HAP

The State Housing Initiatives Partnership (SHIP) program distributes state funds to counties, which then administer local assistance programs. In Palm Beach County, SHIP funds are distributed through the Housing Assistance Program (HAP).

- **SHIP assistance in Palm Beach County can provide:**
- Up to \$60,000 for very low-income buyers (below 50% AMI)
- Up to \$45,000 for low-income buyers (50–80% AMI)
- Up to \$30,000 for moderate-income buyers (80–120% AMI)

Palm Beach County Housing Assistance Program (HAP)

HAP is the primary local assistance program for Palm Beach County buyers. It provides deferred-payment second mortgages with no monthly payments — the loan is repaid when you sell, refinance, or move out.

- Must be a first-time buyer (no homeownership in past 3 years)
- Must meet income limits (varies by household size)
- Must purchase in Palm Beach County
- Must complete a HUD-approved homebuyer education course
- Must work with a participating lender

Homebuyer Education: Required for Most Programs

Nearly every down payment assistance and first-time buyer program requires completion of a HUD-approved homebuyer education course. These courses:

- Are available online and in-person
- Typically take 6–8 hours to complete
- Cover budgeting, the home buying process, mortgage basics, and homeownership responsibilities
- Cost \$75–\$125 for online courses

- Are valid for 12 months from completion date

■ Complete This Early

Approved providers include eHome America, Framework, and local HUD-approved housing counseling agencies. Complete your homebuyer education course early — before you start house hunting — so it does not delay your closing.

How Much Can You Afford as a First-Time Buyer in Palm Beach County?

Here's a practical look at what different income levels can purchase in Palm Beach County using first-time buyer programs:

- **\$60,000/year income:** FHA loan + HAP assistance → purchase price up to \$280,000–\$320,000 with minimal cash to close
- **\$80,000/year income:** FHA or Conventional + Florida Housing → purchase price up to \$360,000–\$420,000
- **\$100,000/year income:** Conventional + Hometown Heroes (if eligible) → purchase price up to \$450,000–\$520,000
- **\$120,000+/year income:** Conventional loan → purchase price up to \$550,000–\$650,000

Common Mistakes First-Time Buyers Make in Florida

- **Waiting too long to apply for assistance.** SHIP and HAP funds run out. Apply early.
- **Not accounting for Florida-specific costs.** Property insurance, flood insurance, and HOA fees can add \$500–\$1,500/month to your payment. Budget for these upfront.
- **Getting pre-qualified instead of pre-approved.** In a competitive market, sellers want a full pre-approval — not just a pre-qualification letter.
- **Making large purchases before closing.** Don't buy a car, open new credit cards, or make large deposits before your loan closes. It can disqualify you.
- **Not shopping lenders.** Rates and fees vary significantly between lenders. A local broker who shops multiple lenders can save you thousands.

Your Next Steps

The best way to navigate Florida's first-time buyer programs is to work with a local mortgage professional who knows them well. Here's what to do:

- Get pre-approved — this is the foundation of everything else
- Complete your homebuyer education course
- Identify which programs you qualify for
- Start house hunting with a clear budget
- Make an offer with a strong pre-approval letter

Ready to explore your options?

Aaron Bath — Senior Mortgage Loan Officer | NMLS #2110744
 ■ (239) 249-1266 | ✉ info@thecapitalfinancialgroup.com
 ■ 110 Front Street, Suite 300, Jupiter, FL 33477
 ■ www.cfgcloans.com

CFGF Loans is based in Jupiter and serves all of Palm Beach County. We work with FHA, VA, USDA, Conventional, Florida Housing, HAP, SHIP, and Hometown Heroes programs every day. Let's identify the programs you qualify for and get you pre-approved with confidence.

This guide is for educational and informational purposes only and does not constitute an offer to lend, financial advice, or a commitment to any loan product. All loan programs, rates, terms, eligibility requirements, and assistance amounts are subject to change and depend on individual creditworthiness, property, income, and other factors. Please consult with a licensed mortgage loan officer for advice tailored to your unique circumstances. Capital Financial Group Corporation is an Equal Housing Lender. NMLS #2547138. Last updated: July 31, 2026.