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AN EXTENDED GUIDE · NO. 1946

Updated November 2026

Veteran ID cards online: the VIC and the VHIC

An Extended Guide · No. 1946 · VETERANS

Tech Made Simple. Service Made Personal.

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What's Inside

Everything in this guide, with page numbers. Skip to whichever chapter answers your question right now.

Two different veteran ID cards, often confused 3

The VHIC: your VA health care card 3

The VIC: proof of service for discounts and recognition 4

Which card do you actually want? 5

Getting the VHIC: enroll, then apply 6

Getting the VIC online 7

The DD-214 and other proof behind it all 8

Other IDs that prove veteran status 9

Keeping your cards and avoiding scams 10

Common worries, answered plainly 10

A simple plan to get the right card 11

Your visit — and my promise 12

A Note From Bill 13

Your Visit — and My Promise 14

1 Two different veteran ID cards, often confused

One of the most common sources of confusion for veterans is that there are several different identification cards tied to military service, and they look similar in name but do very different things. Two in particular get mixed up constantly: the Veteran Health Identification Card, or VHIC, and the Veteran ID Card, or VIC. They sound almost identical, both prove you are a veteran in some sense, and yet they are issued for different reasons, obtained in different ways, and useful for different purposes.

Sorting out which card is which — and which one you actually want — saves a great deal of frustration, because people often go looking for one when they need the other, or assume a single card does everything. The short version is that the VHIC is your card for getting care in the VA health system, while the VIC is a convenient proof-of-service card mainly used for discounts and recognition. Each has its place, and some veterans will want both, while others need only one.

This guide untangles the two cards, explains what each is for and who can get it, walks through how to obtain each — including the online steps — and helps you decide which one (or both) fits your needs. It also touches on the other forms of ID that prove veteran status, so you have the full picture. By the end you will know exactly which card you want and how to get it, without the common mix-up that sends people down the wrong path.

2 The VHIC: your VA health care card

The Veteran Health Identification Card, the VHIC, is the card you use to receive care within the VA health system. If you are enrolled in VA health care and go to a VA medical center or clinic for appointments, this is the card you present — it identifies you to the VA health system, much as an insurance card identifies you at a civilian doctor's office, and it is used for checking in to appointments and such.

It is fundamentally a health-care card, not a general ID or a discount card.

Because it is tied to VA health care, there is an important prerequisite: you must be enrolled in VA health care to get a VHIC. The card is for people who are actually using the VA for their medical care, so the first step for anyone who wants one but is not yet enrolled is to enroll in VA health care, which is a separate process. Once you are enrolled, the VHIC becomes available to you as your identification within that health system.

It is worth being clear about what the VHIC is not, since this is where confusion creeps in. It is not a credit card or an insurance card that pays for anything, and it does not authorize care outside the VA. It is not primarily a discount card, though some businesses and some military exchanges have accepted it as proof of veteran status for certain purposes.

Its core job is to be your health identification within the VA, and if that is what you need — you use VA health care and want the card for your appointments — the VHIC is the one you are after, obtained after enrollment as described shortly.

3 The VIC: proof of service for discounts and recognition

The Veteran ID Card, the VIC, is a different thing entirely: a card whose main purpose is to give veterans an easy, official way to prove their service — chiefly for claiming veteran discounts at businesses and for the simple recognition of having served — without having to carry around their discharge paperwork or rely on a card tied to health care or retirement. It is a convenience-and-recognition card, not a health or benefits-access card.

The appeal of the VIC is that it fills a gap many veterans feel. A veteran who did not retire from the military, and who is not using VA health care, may have no handy card that simply says 'I am a veteran' for the restaurant offering a discount or the store honoring service. Carrying a copy of a DD-214 around is impractical and exposes sensitive information.

The VIC solves that — a wallet-sized card that proves honorable service for everyday purposes like discounts, with none of your sensitive details beyond what is needed.

What the VIC is not is a card that gets you into VA facilities, VA health care, or federal benefits — it does not grant access to bases, the commissary, VA medical care, or the like. It is specifically a proof-of-service card for the civilian world of discounts and recognition. So if what you want is a simple, official card to show that you served — mainly to claim the discounts many businesses offer veterans — the VIC is your card, and it is obtained through an online application described below, quite separately from the health-care-tied VHIC.

4 Which card do you actually want?

With the two cards distinguished, the practical question is which one fits your situation, and the answer usually follows directly from what you are trying to do — so it is worth matching your need to the right card before you apply for anything. Going after the wrong card is the main way people waste effort here.

If you use VA health care, or intend to, and want a card for your VA medical appointments, you want the VHIC — and your path runs through enrolling in VA health care first. If you simply want an official, convenient card to prove you are a veteran for discounts and recognition in the civilian world, and you are not focused on VA health care, you want the VIC, obtained through its online application.

Many veterans who use VA health care end up with the VHIC naturally and may not need the VIC at all, since the VHIC can serve as proof of veteran status in many of the same discount situations; others who do not use VA health care find the VIC is exactly the card they were missing.

Some veterans will want both — the VHIC for their VA care and the VIC for civilian proof-of-service — while many will find that one card covers all their needs. There is no harm in having both if they serve you, but there is no need to chase a card you will not use. The clean way to decide is to ask what you actually need a card for: medical

care in the VA system points to the VHIC; proving your service for discounts points to the VIC; and if you have the VHIC already, check whether it alone covers your discount needs before bothering with the VIC.

Matching the card to the purpose spares you the common wasted trip after the wrong one.

5 Getting the VHIC: enroll, then apply

Obtaining the VHIC is a two-stage affair, because of its tie to VA health care: first you must be enrolled in VA health care, and then you apply for the card — which includes having your photo taken. Understanding both stages up front keeps the process from feeling disjointed.

1. If you are not already enrolled in VA health care, enroll first — online at VA.gov's health-benefits section (signing in with your ID.me or Login.gov account), by phone, by mail, or in person at a VA medical facility.
2. Once your enrollment is confirmed, you can apply for the VHIC — online through VA.gov, or in person at your local VA medical center.
3. Have your photo taken for the card; this is done at your VA medical center, so a visit (or coordinating with the enrollment coordinator there) is part of getting the VHIC.
4. The VA produces the card and mails it to you.
5. If you ever need a replacement, contact your VA medical center's enrollment coordinator to arrange a new photo and card.

The photo step is why the VHIC cannot be entirely an online, mail-it-to-me affair the way some cards are — the card carries your picture, taken at a VA facility. For veterans who already go to a VA medical center for care, this is a small addition to a visit they are making anyway. For those newly enrolling, it means a trip to the facility is part of the process.

Your facility's enrollment coordinator is the person who handles this, and asking them to help arrange your VHIC photo and card is the smoothest way through — they do

this routinely and can walk you through it.

6 Getting the VIC online

The Veteran ID Card, by contrast, is obtained through a straightforward online application and does not require VA health enrollment or a trip to a facility — which makes it the more accessible of the two for a veteran who just wants proof of service. The whole thing is done through the VA's website, and the card is mailed to you once approved.

1. Go to VA.gov and find the section for getting a Veteran ID Card (in the records or identity-verification area of the site).
2. Sign in with your secure account (ID.me or Login.gov — the same used across VA services).
3. Apply for the VIC, which involves confirming your identity and your service, and uploading a digital passport-style photo of yourself as instructed.
4. The VA reviews the application against your service records; this review can take some weeks.
5. Once approved, the VA mails your Veteran ID Card to you.

Because the VIC application is handled online and you supply your own photo rather than having one taken at a facility, a veteran can get one from home without visiting a VA medical center — a real convenience for those who do not use VA health care. The main thing to expect is that it is not instant: the VA reviews the application against its records, which takes time, so patience is required between applying and the card arriving in the mail.

But the effort on your end is modest — an online form, identity verification, and a photo — and then you wait for the card. If the review cannot confirm your service automatically, you may be asked to provide documentation such as your DD-214, the same as with other veteran verifications.

Rather not do this yourself? I'll come to your home and set it up for you — a flat $99 first visit across Portage County, Ohio and nearby communities. Outside the area? I also help remotely by phone or screen-share. Book at billshometech.com/book or call (330) 200-8042.

7 The DD-214 and other proof behind it all

Underlying both cards — and indeed most veteran benefits — is the fundamental proof of your service, and when either card's process cannot automatically confirm your service, this is what resolves it, so it is worth understanding. For most veterans, the key document is the DD-214, the discharge paperwork that records your service dates and the character of your discharge.

Both the VHIC and VIC processes check your service against the VA's records, and for many veterans that happens smoothly. But for those whose records are older or incomplete — common for service long ago — the process may ask you to provide documentation, and the DD-214 is the usual answer. Having a copy of your DD-214 on hand, therefore, smooths not just these ID cards but a whole range of veteran dealings, and it is a document worth locating and keeping safe if you have not already.

If you cannot find your DD-214, you are not stuck: the National Archives holds military service records and can provide a copy, and a separate guide covers requesting your military records online in detail. It is worth doing regardless of these cards, since the DD-214 is the master key to so many veteran benefits. The reassuring point is that neither card's process is a true barrier for an eligible veteran — when the automatic check falls short, providing your service documentation resolves it, and if that document has gone missing over the years, it can be recovered from the Archives.

8 Other IDs that prove veteran status

Beyond the VHIC and VIC, it is worth knowing the other forms of identification that establish veteran status, because depending on your situation one of these may already serve the purpose you were seeking a card for — and you may not need a new card at all. The landscape of veteran ID is broader than just these two cards.

Military retirees carry a uniformed-services ID card that proves their status and grants access to bases and benefits that the VHIC and VIC do not. A veteran with a service-connected disability may have specific VA documentation of that status. Some states add a veteran designation to the regular driver's license or state ID — often a small notation indicating veteran status — which for everyday discount purposes can do exactly what the VIC does, obtained right at the state motor-vehicles office when you renew.

And the digital verification through ID.me, covered in its own guide, increasingly serves to prove veteran status online for discounts without any physical card at all.

This matters practically because you might already have, or more easily obtain, something that meets your need. If your main goal is veteran discounts, a veteran designation on your driver's license (if your state offers it) or online ID.me verification may serve just as well as applying for the VIC, and with less effort. If you are a retiree, your retiree ID already proves far more than either card.

So before applying for a new card, it is worth considering which forms of veteran ID you already hold or could more easily get — the right one for your purpose may already be in your wallet or a quick stop at the DMV away.

9 Keeping your cards and avoiding scams

Once you have a veteran ID card, a little care keeps it useful and keeps you safe, since cards tied to veteran status are occasionally targets for scams and misuse. The cards are proof of who you are and that you served, so treating them with reasonable care is sensible, as with any ID.

Keep the card secure as you would any identification, and if it is lost or stolen, arrange a replacement through the proper channel — the VA medical center's enrollment coordinator for the VHIC, or the VA's records process for the VIC. Be aware that the VHIC in particular carries identifying information, so you would not want it falling into the wrong hands any more than you would a driver's license.

Neither card contains your full Social Security number on its face in the way old military IDs once did, which is a deliberate privacy improvement, but they are still identity documents to guard.

WATCH OUT

Be wary of any service, website, or caller offering to get you a veteran ID card for a fee, or asking for payment or sensitive details to 'process' your card. The VHIC and VIC are free and are obtained only through the VA's own official channels — VA.gov and VA medical centers. Anyone charging you for one, or reaching out unexpectedly asking for your information to issue one, is running a scam. Apply only through the official VA site that you reach by typing the address yourself, and ignore the rest.

10 Common worries, answered plainly

The questions veterans ask me most about these cards.

What's the difference between the VHIC and the VIC?

The VHIC is your card for getting care in the VA health system (requires VA health enrollment, photo taken at a VA facility). The VIC is a proof-of-service card mainly for

discounts and recognition (applied for online, photo you supply). Different purposes entirely.

Do I have to be enrolled in VA health care to get a card?

For the VHIC, yes — it's a health-care card, so you enroll first. For the VIC, no — it's obtained online without health enrollment or a facility visit. That's the more accessible card if you just want proof of service.

Do these cost anything?

No — both are free through the VA's official channels. Never pay anyone to get you one; a fee or an unsolicited offer to 'process' your card is a scam.

I just want veteran discounts — which should I get?

The VIC works, but check first whether your state adds a veteran designation to your driver's license, or whether online ID.me verification serves — either may meet your need with less effort. If you already have a VHIC, it often proves veteran status for discounts too.

11 A simple plan to get the right card

Getting the right veteran ID card is mostly a matter of matching the card to your purpose, then following the proper free channel.

First, decide what you need a card for. If it is VA medical care, you want the VHIC: enroll in VA health care if you are not already (online at VA.gov, by phone, or in person), then apply for the VHIC and arrange your photo through your VA medical center's enrollment coordinator. If it is proof of service for discounts and recognition, you want the VIC: apply online at VA.gov, signing in with your ID.me or Login.gov account, confirm your identity and service, upload a photo, and wait for the card to arrive.

Either way, have your DD-214 handy in case the automatic check needs it, and request a copy from the National Archives first if you cannot find it.

Before applying for the VIC, though, take a moment to consider whether something you already have or can get more easily — a veteran designation on your driver's license, online ID.me verification, or an existing VHIC — already meets your discount needs, which might save you the application entirely. Whatever you pursue, use only the free official VA channels, guard the card as the identity document it is, and ignore anyone charging a fee or soliciting you for one.

Match the card to the purpose, follow the right free path, and you will have exactly the proof of your service you need — without the common mix-up between these two similarly-named cards.

> *VHIC for your VA health care, VIC for proving your service — two different cards, both free, each from the VA's own channels. Match the card to what you actually need, and skip the one you don't.*

12 Your visit — and my promise

Sorting out which veteran ID card you need and getting it — figuring out VHIC versus VIC for your situation, setting up your VA.gov sign-in, enrolling in VA health care if the VHIC is the goal, applying for the VIC online and preparing the photo, or tracking down your DD-214 if the check needs it — is exactly the kind of patient, practical help I am glad to give at your kitchen table, step by step and with no rushing.

My promise is simple: I will steer you to the right card for what you actually need (and tell you honestly if something you already have will do), use only the free official channels, never a paid middleman, and leave you with the proof of your service in hand — and clear on which card does what.

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Monday–Friday, 9 AM–5 PM (closed weekends); Sophie answers day or night.

BEFORE YOU GO

A Note From Bill

A quick note from Bill. I write these guides to make home tech a little less frustrating, and I do my best to keep every step accurate and up to date. Still, every home, device, and setup is a bit different, so I can't promise a guide will match yours exactly or fix your particular problem. These guides are for general information only — they're not professional, legal, or financial advice, and they don't replace your device's own manual or the manufacturer's instructions. Please go slow, use your own good judgment, and use everything here at your own risk. If a step involves electrical wiring, a gas appliance, a water heater, plumbing, or climbing a ladder — or if anything just doesn't feel safe — please stop and call a licensed professional (or give me a call at 330-200-8042). Bill's Home Tech and Bill Davis can't be responsible for any damage, data loss, or injury that results.

HOW I CAN HELP

Your Visit — and My Promise

You don't have to remember all of it — just that a friendly, patient person is one call away, whenever you'd rather have a hand.

KEY SPECS

In your home — $99 flat for the first visit, no contracts and no surprises, with a 30-day come-back-free follow-up. In-home visits cover Portage County, Ohio and nearby communities.
Outside the area? Remotely — $49 for a screen-share session (free for Support Plan members, $39/mo), refundable if I can't fix it — and credited toward a visit if you'd rather have me in person. Book either at billshometech.com/book.

GOOD TO KNOW

My promise — If you're not 100% satisfied with your visit, I'll come back at no charge, or refund the full $99. No questions, no awkwardness. That's how I'd want to be treated.

Whenever you're ready, I'll come to your home anywhere in Portage County, Ohio and nearby communities, at your pace. Too far for a house call? I also help remotely. Book at billshometech.com/book or call (330) 200-8042. — Bill

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