



CAPITOL UPDATE

State Representative **MAUREEN MADDEN**

Representing the 115th Legislative District

Winter 2021

Wreaths Across America



Infrastructure 101.
See inside for more information.

HONORING OUR VETERANS



Meet **Maureen Hickman Caporaso**. She is the Gold Star Fellow with Congresswoman Susan Wild's office – the third person in the country chosen for this role. Maureen is a Gold Star/MIA Daughter of USAF Captain Vincent J. Hickman. Her father enlisted in the Air Force, as did his three brothers and one sister, making them the largest commissioned Air Force family in history, at the time of his death. His chosen career path was to fly and to serve his country, and he loved what he did.



Captain Vincent J. Hickman gave his life for our country. He was a Navigator with the 1st Air Commando Squadron based in Bien Hoa in South Vietnam when his B-26 aircraft was shot down on Jan. 14, 1964. He is still unaccounted for to this day. It was the '60s, and the Vietnam War was not popular. His widow was left to pick up the pieces at only 29 years

old, with four daughters under the age of 5 years old. She was disrespected by the media and left to fend for herself. She had no direction and no counseling for herself or her children. Because no one was able to reach the crash site for five days, where they found no evidence of survivors, there was also no closure. The uncertainty still lingers to this day.

Hickman Caporaso accepted the role of the Gold Star Fellow with Representative Wild's office almost a year ago. The premise behind the Congressional Fellowship is that a child who has lost a parent in service to this country should be offered a leg up and congressional experience. She was matched with Rep. Wild in the 7th District. She is busy building relationships with Veterans Administration directors, college and university services, chambers of commerce, and many other decision-makers in the veteran and survivor communities.

Hickman Caporaso is assisting area veterans with health and benefit questions, and veterans who reach out to her because they have exhausted all of their options trying to get healthcare, financial aid, service records, medals and commendations and assistance with the transition from military to civilian life. She is also working on opening a veteran center in the Lehigh Valley to address mental health issues of our military service members, veterans, and their families, and to help them reacclimate to civilian life upon their return. They deserve no less for putting their lives on the line for our country.

"They say life begins at the end of your comfort zone. The fact that I can represent Gold Star Families and speak on their behalf is a prime example. I may have taken the circuitous route, but I believe I am where I was meant to be and doing what I was meant to do. And I believe my father is very proud."
– Maureen Hickman Caporaso

The following nonprofit programs support Pennsylvania veterans:

- **Military Family Relief Assistance Program (MFRAP)** – Provides financial assistance to service members and their families with immediate financial need.
- **Veterans' Trust Fund (VTF)** – Issues grants to organizations that assist veterans in need of housing and other necessities in addition to providing grants for veterans in financial need.
- **Pennsylvania Veterans' Memorial Trust Fund** – Funds the maintenance of the Pennsylvania Veterans' Memorial located at Fort Indiantown Gap National Cemetery in Lebanon County, which recognizes the service and sacrifice in veterans of all service periods.
- **Six Resident Welfare Funds** – Provides activities and entertainment for residents at Pennsylvania's six veteran homes – Delaware Valley Veterans' Home, Philadelphia; Gino J. Merli Veterans' Center, Scranton; Hollidaysburg Veterans' Home, Hollidaysburg; Pennsylvania Soldiers' and Sailors' Home, Erie; Southeastern Veterans' Center, Spring City; and Southwestern Veterans' Center, Pittsburgh.

More information about the funds and programs in need of support can be found on the DMVA website, <https://www.pa.gov/dmva/donate/>.

Wreaths Across America

Wreaths Across America, which came to the Capitol in Harrisburg in mid-December (see cover), promotes a mission to "Remember, Honor and Teach" by coordinating wreath-laying ceremonies at Arlington National Cemetery and more than 2,500 additional locations in all 50 U.S. states, at sea and abroad.

Veterans are devoted sons and daughters, fathers and mothers, sisters and brothers, from all backgrounds, each of whom places their life on the line for our freedoms.

The goals are to "Remember our fallen U.S. veterans," "Honor those who serve," and "Teach our children the value of freedom."

Guenst attends signing of veterans bills at White House

State Rep. Nancy Guenst, D-Montgomery/Phila., proudly attended the signing of four federal veterans bills at the White House this fall.

Guenst is an Army veteran who understands fellow veterans have often struggled after returning to civilian life. "We have an obligation to care for our veterans after they have sacrificed so much for our country, and these laws will help do that," Guenst said after attending the bill-signing.

Here is a quick summary of those bills signed into law by President Joe Biden:

- **S.1031**, A bill to require the Comptroller General of the United States to conduct a study on disparities associated with race and ethnicity with respect to certain benefits administered by the Secretary of Veterans Affairs, and for other purposes: Requires the Government Accountability Office to assess whether there are disparities associated with race and ethnicity when it comes to VA benefits and disability ratings.
- **S.894**, Hire Veteran Health Heroes Act of 2021: Directs the Department of Veterans Affairs to create a program to recruit military medical personnel who have less than a year left in their service to work in federal healthcare occupations.
- **S.1095**, Colonel John M. McHugh Tuition Fairness for Survivors Act of 2021: Ensures that surviving spouses and children of veterans who access the Survivors' and Dependents' Education Assistance program are eligible for in-state tuition wherever they choose to go to school, whether they live in that state or not.
- **S.796**, Protecting Moms Who Served Act of 2021: Commissions a comprehensive study of maternal health challenges facing veterans and invests in maternal care coordination programs at the VA.

Seasoned Veterans group here to help

A group of retired servicemen in our community hopes to help other veterans in the Poconos. Seasoned Veterans, a non-profit group, is making it their mission to help others. "We go out and we volunteer to help other veterans. That's really our code. We really want to go and help other veterans who might not be as fortunate as we are. Any veteran that needs help," said Wilson Gant, Seasoned Veterans president.

Wayne Bolt is a founding member of Seasoned Veterans. "We are the only veterans group in this area, in this immediate area. We are going to get our name out and whatever a veteran needs that we can possibly help them with, we are going to do it. That's our mission, to help veterans," Bolt said.

Since their inception, they have been able to see, firsthand some of the conditions our veterans live in. "Seasoned Veterans is a non-profit, non-partisan organization that has a mission to serve our local veterans," says Clavertis Miller, secretary. There are shelters that house some of the vets, and there are a lot living under bridges. Several of them are dealing with mental issues and homelessness. Included in our mission also is to help those single mothers who've lost their husbands fighting for our country. If a veteran needs referrals for assistance, we can direct them to the proper sources. Helping pay a month's utility bill that's behind, we make every effort to help with that, as well as help if a tank of gas is needed to get to an appointment. We relate to other veteran organizations that also help in assisting with housing. These are a few of the things we're able to do.

If you are a veteran and in need of assistance, or would like to sit in on one of the Seasoned Veterans meetings, please call 570-369-7445 or email seasonedveterans5@gmail.com.

Legislative Corner

Two bills related to veterans were signed into law and three bills were passed by the House over the past few months.

SIGNED INTO PA LAW

Act 87 of 2021 - Veteran Recognition Days

Designates March 6 of each year as "Persian Gulf War Veterans Day" and Oct. 7 of each year as "Global War on Terrorism Day."

Act 89 of 2021 - PA Veterans' Grave Decorations

Provides for the placement, replacement, and collection of flags on the graves of veterans, and penalties for violations of the law, in counties of the second class.

PASSED BY THE PA HOUSE

Veterans' Records of Discharge (HB 1055, Rep. Webster)

Would extend the time when a veteran's record of discharge or separation may not be disclosed — other than to the subject of the records, immediate family, or authorized representatives — to 85 years from 75 years.

Veterans' Pension Program Increase (HB 1220, Rep. Gregory)

Would increase the pension for Pennsylvania veterans who are blind, an amputee, or paralyzed because of their military service to \$200 per month from \$150 per month.

Expanding Life Insurance for Members of the PA National Guard (HB 1612, Rep. Hamm)

Would expand eligibility for the Servicemembers' Group Life Insurance program to more Pennsylvania National Guard members.





Monroe County Veterans Affairs

The Veterans Affairs office provides general veteran benefit services to all veterans and their dependents. Visit the regional office at the Monroe County Administration Building, One Quaker Plaza, Room 101, Stroudsburg, PA 18360, or call 570-517-3187, or visit monroecountypa.gov/Dept/VA for more information.



East Stroudsburg University's 13th Annual Veteran's Day Celebration



Energy assistance program available

Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP) provides a grant to low-income families to pay their heating bills through both cash grants and crisis grants.



Cash grants are a one-time payment sent directly to the applicant's company or fuel provider to be credited onto their bill. These specific grants range from \$200-\$1,000 and are based on household size, income, and fuel type. Crisis grants are available in emergency situations. If you are in dire need of assistance and are in jeopardy of losing your heat, you may receive a crisis grant. The most common situations to be eligible for this grant would be broken heating equipment, leaking lines needing to be fixed or replaced, lack of fuel, termination of utility services and danger of being without fuel or having service terminated. Applicants can receive more than one crisis grant, if necessary, until the maximum benefit of \$600 is reached.

To apply for LIHEAP, visit www.compass.state.pa.us. Applications may also be requested by the statewide LIHEAP Hotline, 1-866-857-7095, or PA Relay at 711 for those who are hearing impaired. Application are also available at local county assistance offices. Eligibility is based upon income. Applicants will be asked to provide proof of income and a recent heating bill, the names of people in the household, as well as the date of birth and Social Security numbers of those living in the household. Once applied, the applicant will receive a written notice if they qualify and the amount of money the grant would be for.

If assistance is needed with the application, please contact one of Rep. Madden's district offices:
Tobyhanna: 570-894-7905, Stroudsburg: 570-420-2850.



Tax season is approaching!

The Pocono Mountains United Way Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) program will be accepting appointments in January to file your 2021 taxes for FREE! To be eligible, your total household income must be \$57,000 or less in 2021. You can set up your appointment to file your federal, state, and local returns by contacting United Way at 570-261-8011 in January.

Additionally, you have the choice to file your 2021 taxes for FREE from home by visiting www.MyFreeTaxes.com. There is no household income limit for this free tax filing option!

The Pennsylvania Department of Revenue also offers various FREE online tax filing services. For more information, visit www.revenue.pa.gov.



The latest "Monroe Matters with Rep. Madden" features an interview with U.S. Congressman Matt Cartright.



Infrastructure 101

The Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) was signed into law by President Joe Biden on Nov. 15, 2021. This \$1.2 trillion bill is a necessary investment into our country's future, covering needs like broadband expansion, sustainable and accessible transportation, repairs on roads and bridges, improved water infrastructure, and much more. "This will position our country to win the 21st century," U.S. Sen. Bob Casey said about the historic infrastructure bill during a fall press conference at Danbury Depot. This bill is imperative to our future prosperity as a nation, but what does this mean for Pennsylvania and the people of our commonwealth? Let's break it down by category:

BROADBAND EXPANSION

As students and employees across the state transitioned to learning and working from home during the pandemic, the need for high-speed internet access became obvious. Fourteen percent of Pennsylvanians do not have an internet subscription, and 3.1% of households live in areas where there is no broadband infrastructure. Under IIJA, Pennsylvania will receive a minimum allocation of \$100 million to help expand broadband coverage across the commonwealth. Additionally, 23% of Pennsylvanians will be eligible for the Affordable Connectivity Benefit, which will help low-income families afford internet access. "We are working with the Monroe County Planning Commission to fill gaps within the county based on the census and a survey that was done about a year ago," said Sharon Laverdure, chairwoman of the Board of Commissioners. "We found some areas that are in desperate need. However, because of the topography, it is challenging. We are working with different municipalities throughout the county to find the best location to implement this expansion. If anybody has any input they'd like to share, feel free to call the Monroe County Commissioners Office at 570-517-3102."

ROADS, HIGHWAYS, AND BRIDGES

In Pennsylvania, there are 3,353 bridges and over 7,540 miles of highway in poor condition. Since 2011, commute times have increased by 7.6% in Pennsylvania, and on average, each driver pays \$620 per year in costs due to driving on roads in need of repair. The IIJA is the single largest dedicated bridge investment since the construction of the interstate highway system. Pennsylvania will receive \$11.3 billion for federal-aid highway apportioned programs and \$1.6 billion for bridge replacement and repairs under the IIJA over five years.

PASSENGER RAIL

The expansion of passenger rail has been a decades-long conversation. With 20,000 NEPA residents commuting to workplaces in northern New Jersey and New York City by bus and car, it is time to implement meaningful change to our transportation infrastructure. This bill provides \$66 billion for Amtrak to improve existing lines and expand service to new areas, including new stops in Scranton, Tobyhanna, Mt. Pocono, and East Stroudsburg. "According to Amtrak's timeline, this project will take about three to five years," Bob Hay, chairman of the Pennsylvania Northeast Regional Railroad Authority, said at the Danbury Depot press conference. This project is not just shovel-ready – it's shovel in the ground. Construction is already underway in the first seven miles of the Lackawanna Cut-Off into New Jersey.

WATER INFRASTRUCTURE

Nationwide, almost 10 million American households and 400,000 schools and childcare centers lack safe drinking water. The infrastructure bill provides funding to deliver clean drinking water to everyone and eliminate the nation's lead service lines and pipes. Pennsylvania will receive \$1.4 billion over five years to improve its water infrastructure.



President Joe Biden and Rep. Madden at a federal news conference on passenger rail in Scranton.

Danbury Depot News Conference with U.S. Sen. Bob Casey



Left to right – Monroe County Commissioner John Christy, Rep. Madden, Sen. Casey, East Stroudsburg Mayor Armand "Doc" Martinelli, Monroe County Commissioner Sharon Lavedure, Pennsylvania Northeast Regional Railroad Authority Chairman Bob Hay.



Rep. Madden speaks about the need for passenger rail in our area.



Sen. Bob Casey speaking.



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Homestead/farmstead exclusion applications

The Monroe County Assessment Office is now accepting Homestead/Farmstead Exclusion applications. This application is meant to provide property tax relief for your primary residence. In addition to the completed form, you must also provide two forms of approved identification reflecting your current address. Acceptable forms of identification include PA Driver's License or ID Card, PA Voter Registration, Berkheimer tax document, paycheck stub or W2 form, and/or a Monroe County license to carry a firearm. Once you have gathered all the necessary documents, you must submit them to the Monroe County Assessment Office for approval. For more information on this process, please call the county assessment office at 570-517-3133. If you need help with filling out this application, please call one of Rep. Madden's district offices to schedule an appointment. The deadline to file is March 1, 2022.

A special thank you

I would like to take this opportunity to express gratitude to two longtime Capitol employees who will be retiring this winter.

First, many thanks to Roseann Cadau, who's been my primary writer since I was first elected in 2016. Roseann has served the Democratic Caucus and the northeast for nearly three decades. Soon after graduating from East Stroudsburg University, she began working for Rep. Joe Battisto in his Capitol office in Harrisburg. I will miss Roseann's dedication and tireless work ethic.

I would also like to express congratulations to Legislative Publications Office graphic designer Kathy Fisher. I have worked closely with Kathy on every district newsletter. She is a talented graphic designer who worked with my office to ensure the newsletters were beautiful and informative. I have received many compliments regarding her newsletters.

So, thank you to both Roseann and Kathy for your service to the caucus, and best wishes for a long and wonderful retirement. You will be missed!



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Rep. Madden would like to thank her staff: Marina Purcaro, Latisha Griffith, Erin DeRosa and Geoff Morrow for their collaboration on this newsletter.