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Va. woman given video link to husband in Iraq But funding woes threaten families' free link to troops

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DANVILLE -- It seemed like a first date when Marine Sgt. Ben Harrelson and Sherri Harrelson, married for two years, talked during a live satellite video call from Iraq.

Sgt. Harrelson, a mechanic in Fallujah, got a chance to visit with his wife and daughter for the first time in months during a program offered by the Freedom Calls Foundation at the Institute for Advanced Learning and Research in Danville.

With tears in her eyes, Sherri told her husband Friday that she missed him.

Ben said the experience made him feel like a teenager again, and he said he had to make sure he looked good for his wife. He has known his wife for eight years and said he never thought he would be nervous to see her.

"It's amazing, awesome and indescribable," he said of the opportunity.

The program was started in 2003 after organizers heard about a soldier who had a \$7,000 cell phone bill from talking to people at home, said John Harlow, executive director of the Freedom Calls Foundation.

The cell phone company would not forgive any of the charges.

The foundation wanted to do something to help troops stay in touch with friends and family at home, Harlow said.

The program is not funded by the military and is free to the families or friends of troops in Iraq.

Because of the expenses, the opportunities for people to connect with their loved ones could be lost.

Harlow said funding is an issue, and the foundation is dependent on donations. It is in danger of being shut down and needs help from people and corporations.

"If the program couldn't continue, tens of thousands of families would be blacked out from their families," Harlow said.

Sherri Harrelson expressed concern that the foundation is low on funding. She said the service it offers is not a matter of how people feel about the war, and that it is important for the morale of the troops, as well as their families.

"This is about showing people you love them regardless of their job," she said.

The video call for the Harrelsons was bittersweet. They were happy to see each other, but as Sherri said, "They still aren't home and still not safe."

"I would give up everything I had to get him back," she said.