



Biggert helping military families get face time with loved ones

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The days of waiting weeks, months or years to see the face of a deployed loved one are long gone.

Digital cameras and worldwide Internet access allow people to send photos with the click of the mouse. And now, videoconferencing is taking communication to the next level.

It is helping military families keep in touch during wartime and it provides soldiers the opportunity to take part in momentous occasions.

From graduations and births to parent-teacher conferences and doctors appointments, videoconferencing technology is bringing military families together when it would be otherwise impossible.

U.S. Rep. Judy Biggert (R-Hinsdale) is inviting people to her Willowbrook office to connect via videoconference with family and friends stationed in Iraq.

She represents the 13th District, which includes the southern half of DuPage, northern Will and a small portion of Cook counties. Local towns in Biggert's district are Lemont, Lockport, New Lenox, Orland, Palos Park and Tinley Park.

The service, however, is open to anyone in the Chicago area.

Biggert has joined forces with Freedom Calls Foundation, a New York-based nonprofit organization, to organize and schedule the sessions free of charge.

Freedom Calls conducts about 1,000 videoconferences each month from four military bases in Iraq. Camp Taji, Camp Fallujah, Al-Asad Airbase and Camp Victory are equipped with the technology required for the cyber meetings.

Foundation executive director John Harlow II said it costs between \$50,000 and \$200,000 to equip a facility with the necessary communication equipment, and equally as much to maintain it each year.

Biggert's office is compiling a list of people to participate in the first videoconference session in the Willowbrook office. Because military records are private, however, the Department of Defense cannot help locate eligible families.

Interested parties with loved ones at one of the four equipped bases in Iraq are urged to call (630) 655-2052 to sign up.

The first session from Biggert's office will most likely be a one-day event that can accommodate between eight and 16 families, Harlow said.

"Seeing is relieving," he said. "It's a tremendous rush of emotion" for those who talk to friends or family in Iraq via videoconference.

For more information on Freedom Calls or to donate, visit www.freedomcalls.org.