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Vendors donate Internet gear to troops in Iraq

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The Army has accepted about \$5 million worth of donated equipment and services to provide Internet links for ground troops in Iraq.

The gear comes from the Freedom Calls Foundation, a nonprofit coalition formed last year. One base, near Balad north of Baghdad, has been hooked up with a mix of wired, wireless and satellite links for soldiers to communicate with friends and family at home.

"We're looking to roll out to three additional bases over the next 60 days," said Ed Buckstel, operations director of the Brooklyn Heights, N.Y., foundation. The project has been in the works for eight months, but after the Army's April 6 acceptance, "everything went into fast-forward," he said.

In August, Buckstel, vice president of satellite service provider SkyFrames Inc. of Costa Mesa, Calif., received an inquiry about what equipment would be needed to provide satellite links for the troops' morale, welfare and recreational use.

The Iraq version of an Internet café, usually a tent with a satellite link and a bank of notebook PCs, had proved popular with troops but was not available everywhere. Buckstel solicited help to increase connectivity, and eventually the foundation was established to handle donations.

The group had hoped to have the links set up by last Christmas, but red tape and logistics slowed the job.

"They didn't exactly know how to get [the donations] through the Army," said Stephen Larsen, spokesman for the Program Executive Office for Enterprise Information Systems at Fort Monmouth, N.J. And the Army is not used to companies trying to give it things for free. "It took them a while to figure out how to accept it," he said.

The Army's product manager for defense-wide transmission systems helped to shepherd the donations through the bureaucracy. Among the issues to be worked out was: Who would be responsible for equipment in Iraq, and what would happen to it when troops came home? It was decided that local morale, welfare and recreation officers in Iraq would sign for equipment and that the product management office for DWTS would decide on its disposition later.

"The equipment will either be transferred to other MWR activities, placed on long-term storage or disposed of, if the equipment is obsolete at that point," project leader Janice Starek said.

Army acceptance gave Freedom Calls access to military air transport to Iraq and to ground convoys for delivery and installation of equipment there. Engineers from Hewlett-Packard Co. and Loral Space & Communications Ltd. of New York volunteered to go to Iraq to install the equipment.

Donations include 1,000 notebooks, 100 printers and scanners from HP; 500 Web cameras and microphones from Logitech Inc. of Fremont, Calif.; satellite dishes, hub connections and free bandwidth from Loral; a wireless system from Motorola Inc. to hook up troops within 15 miles of a satellite link; and more than \$300,000 worth of cargo space from Federal Express Inc.