



## **Med centers help families connect with troops**

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The families of some local troops in Iraq have a new way to keep in touch, just in time for the holidays.

Three medical sites in Southwest Virginia will provide their teleconference equipment to allow families to talk with loved ones stationed at Camp Fallujah and Camp Cooke in Iraq, officials said Monday.

Troops and family members will be able to see and hear each other over a live satellite video feed.

"We're doing this free of charge because it's the right thing to do," said Dr. Karen Rheuban, medical director of telemedicine for the University of Virginia, which will coordinate the program. "These soldiers are out there risking their lives. We know there's nothing for a morale booster like getting to see your family, especially over the holidays."

Teleconferencing will be offered at the Southwest Virginia Higher Education Center in Abingdon, Saltville Medical Center and Norton Community Hospital.

Freedom Calls, a New York-based, not-for-profit group, will provide the satellite feeds.

The group organized last year to offer soldiers and Marines a more immediate way to communicate with their families, said John Harlow, executive director. Since then, troops from across the country have used teleconferencing equipment provided by hospitals, law firms and other businesses to talk with family members, watch graduations, celebrate birthdays, see their children born and even to marry, he said.

"It's very much a transformation of the paradigm of the last 5,000 years," Harlow said. "They can participate in all these milestone events."

The group hopes to expand to six more bases in Iraq in the next few months, he said.

UVa officials tested the setup Monday during a three-way teleconference between Camp Cooke, Norton Community Hospital and the UVa hospital in Charlottesville.

"It's just like regular TV quality," Rheuban said. "You'd never know it was 6,000 miles away."

Families of local troops said they hope they'll get to use the system to reach their loved ones.

"It would be wonderful," said Tara Spears of Bristol Virginia, whose husband, Staff Sgt. John Spears, recently deployed en route to Iraq with Troop F, 2nd Squadron, of the 278th Regimental Combat Team. "Right now, any point of contact would be good. Just seeing and hearing from them will mean a lot."

The sites have begun taking appointments, and workers will do their best to accommodate schedules and the time difference in Iraq, Rheuban said.

"My guys at UVa have said they will stay open 24 hours a day, seven days a week," she said. "And we welcome the families of soldiers from Tennessee, West Virginia and Kentucky."

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