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Video hookup brings soldier home to husband

Long-distance connection program helps link troops to families in Iowa

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Rob Brown saw his wife, Sgt. Heather Brown, on Monday morning for the first time in 11 months.

He was at the Grimes State Office Building in Des Moines. She was about 6,600 miles away in Iraq.

They were communicating on a videoconferencing network known as "Operation Hometown Link." The program is a collaboration of the Iowa National Guard, the Iowa Communications Network and the nonprofit Freedom Calls Foundation, which has provided similar hookups in other states.



JOHN GAPS III/REGISTER PHOTOS

Rob Brown of Des Moines, left, talks to his wife, Sgt. Heather Brown, who is stationed with the Iowa National Guard in Iraq, via videoconference link at the Grimes State Office Building in Des Moines on Monday as Gov. Chet Culver looks on.

Gov. Chet Culver said Monday that the free videoconferences will be available to Iowa military families Mondays through Fridays from 7 a.m. to 10 p.m., and on Saturdays from 7 a.m. to 5 p.m. Families and soldiers can schedule one session per month. The first session can be up to one hour, with additional sessions of up to 30 minutes.

Rob Brown, who lives in Des Moines, talked with his wife, while his mother and father, Diana and Bob Brown of Patterson, were seated next to him. Heather Brown's parents, Dick and Shelly Schaff of Osceola, were across the table. Shelly Schaff dabbed her eyes throughout the session.

"It looks like she's really been taking care of herself," Rob Brown remarked after seeing his wife on the video screen. Heather Brown's mother said afterward that the videoconference was "wonderful," although she won't always attend future sessions to allow her daughter an opportunity to spend more one-on-one time with her husband.

Rob and Heather Brown were married on Oct. 8, 2005, just 12 days before she was mobilized with the Iowa National Guard's 133rd Infantry Battalion. She is now a communications specialist in Iraq. She had been expected to return to Iowa in March or April, but because of President Bush's order adding troops in Iraq, the battalion may not come back to the United States until August.

Culver said the videoconferencing program is a recognition that long deployments disrupt the lives of Iowans serving in the military and their families and friends.

Freedom Calls has provided videoconferencing sessions periodically in the past for Iowa National Guard soldiers deployed in Iraq.