



Video links to Iraq offered for free

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By Pat Shellenbarger
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GRAND RAPIDS -- Asked if there was anything they would like sent to them, the sailor and two Marines in Iraq, appearing on a TV screen at Grand Rapids City Hall, thought for a moment.

"Butterfingers," Marine Cpl. Leon Branchaud said.

The other two nodded.

The three, from Rhode Island, Florida and Oklahoma, were last-minute stand-ins when no servicemembers from West Michigan could be found to demonstrate a free service allowing families to have live video conversations with their loved ones in Iraq.

The service, sponsored locally by the city of Grand Rapids, the Grand Rapids Area Chamber of Commerce and TDS Metrocom, is part of a national nonprofit network called Operation Freedom Calls.

Within 10 days, equipment is expected to be installed at Grand Rapids police headquarters allowing families to hold two-way video and audio conversations with servicemembers in Iraq.

The hardest part Monday was finding a soldier in Iraq to talk with during the demonstration.

At first, the TV monitor showed an empty chair at a military base in Al Asad, Iraq. The equipment, using telephone lines, satellites and the Internet, was working fine, said Mark Neistat, TDS Metrocom regional marketing manager. "When it works, it's terrific," Neistat said. "The difficult part is getting soldiers -- not because they don't want to, but because we have to go through the chain of command."

John Harlow, a former Wall Street attorney who founded Operation Freedom Calls, appeared on the monitor from his office in New Jersey and said he started the free service after hearing about a soldier in Iraq who ran up a \$7,000 cell-phone bill calling home.

"I just didn't think that was right, that families should be exploited during war time," he said.

The service is available at four sites in Iraq -- Camp Taji, Al Asad Airbase, Camp Fallujah and Camp Victory, Harlow said.

Grand Rapids is the second Michigan site set up by TDS. Kalamazoo was the first, and the company plans to open sites in Lansing and in Southeast Michigan, Neistat said.

Grand Rapids police headquarters was selected so the service can be available 24 hours a day, seven days a week, Mayor George Heartwell said.

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