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Families Talk to Soldiers Via Video

Conferencing program gets soldiers in Iraq in touch with their families

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The Boston-area families of American soldiers stationed in Iraq and Afghanistan will have new access to video conferences with their relatives, thanks to two Harvard schools.

The Kennedy School of Government and the Faculty of Arts and Sciences (FAS) will offer free video conferencing to families of U.S. soldiers as part of Freedom Calls, a nationwide program to keep those in the service in touch with their families.

The Kennedy School will open its video conference resources to all Boston-area families of the soldiers, while FAS facilities will be available exclusively to the school's affiliates.

"We have our own facility at the Kennedy School, and we're offering it to anyone in the Boston and Cambridge area, not just Harvard people," said Anne Drazen, associate dean of Information Services at the Kennedy School. "It's a terrific endeavor, and we're glad to support it."

Thomas R. Burke of Dorchester, Mass., whose sister, Specialist Tracy M. Burke, is stationed in Iraq said his sister was able to "attend" his wedding this past August through a conference call arranged by Freedom Calls. "We were able to talk to her, see her, find out she was doing," he said.

"It's just astounding," he said.

Robert G. Doyle, director of FAS Instructional Media Services, said that he was inspired to propose the service when he heard news reports about several N.J. companies that were offering the service. "I thought we could do the same thing," he said.

According to Doyle, FAS was very supportive, and after quick Faculty endorsement, the proposal was approved by the University administration last Thursday.

Anthony DiBartolo, manager of FAS Instructional Media Services' Media Production Center (MPC), said that providing the service will be a relatively simple procedure. "The technology exists and it's not particularly hard to do," he said. "We'd need the IP address and available bandwidth from point to point."

The MPC's video conference facilities are usually used by FAS affiliates for academic and personal purposes, in particular by faculty members who need to attend conferences or lecture at other universities, DiBartolo said.

Doyle said that the complimentary service would not interfere with regular MPC operations, but pointed out that the service is not usually offered free-of-charge.

"This is a special exception," he said, noting that when the MPC's schedule adjusts to accommodate the new service, any additional costs incurred, such as overtime wages, would be paid for by FAS.

Though the new service is designed for soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan, Doyle said that FAS affiliates could probably use it to contact relatives stationed in other countries.

"We want to help families keep in touch with loved ones," Doyle said. "I have three daughters away at school, and I just couldn't imagine what it must be like to have family so much farther away and in such dangerous places."

G.I. CALL HOME

Doyle's sentiments were echoed by John B. Harlow II, co-founder and executive director of the Freedom Calls Foundation. Harlow said that his mission "is not about policy, it's about family. These are people who made a commitment to their country; we've enabled them to keep their commitments to their families while they do so."

The Foundation was created "about a year ago, because we found out that soldiers were passing the hat, trying to build their own network to call home," Harlow said.

Freedom Calls provides American soldiers with free 24-hour access to telephone calls, e-mail, internet and video conferences.

Harvard will be a part of Operation Hometown Link, a new Freedom Calls program through which universities, corporations and other institutions open their video conference facilities to local families. Though the program is expected to grow to include 2,000 sites across the United States by January, Harlow said that the involvement of the two Harvard schools is of special importance because they are the only sites in Cambridge and have high visibility. "Everybody knows Harvard University, and their participation helps to create awareness of the

Homeland Link program, which leads to others offering their facilities," he said.

Harlow said video conferencing has had the biggest impact out of the many types of communications offered by Freedom Calls. "It's totally changing the way that families interact during wartime," he said.

Harlow said servicemen have attended their children's first birthday parties, seen their kids take their first steps, and have even been married by video link. "It's awesome stuff," he said.