

KANSAS CITY STAR

Video conference calls connect soldiers, their families

By JENNIFER BHARGAVA
The Kansas City Star

An area car dealership is trying to make communication a little easier for Johnson County families who have soldiers in Iraq.

Overland Park Jeep-Dodge recently implemented Freedom Calls, a free program that allows families and friends to communicate via a video phone with their loved ones serving in the Middle Eastern country.

The calls may last anywhere from 30 minutes to an hour.

"I've always wanted to do something for the military because they spend so much time without their families and they serve our country so well," said Norman Vialle, the owner and general manager of the dealership. "They don't get enough recognition for all the sacrifices they make and the work they do overseas. I thought it would be great to show them how thankful we are."

He found out about the program a few months ago when he attended a national Chrysler conference. When he contacted the national organization Freedom Calls, he was surprised to learn that not only was his the first car dealership in the United States to express interest but he was also the first company in Kansas City to start such a service for the community.

Setting up the technology for the calls was a lot easier than Vialle anticipated. In the upstairs conference room, all that was needed was a computer with a large screen, plus the camera.

Similar equipment was placed in the five Iraqi camps where soldiers can call in from: Camp Taji, Camp Fallujah, Camp Taqaddum, Al Asad Airbase and Camp Victory.

In the past few weeks, the dealership's employees have been busy spreading the word. They put a notice in the Leavenworth military newspaper and informed military officials who buy Jeeps from them.

The word, however, is spreading slowly. Only a few families have expressed interest so far and the scheduled calls were eventually canceled because of happy endings: The soldiers found out they were returning home.



Overland Park Jeep-Dodge recently implemented Freedom Calls, a service that connects families with service members in Iraq. Bringing the service to the area was the idea of dealership owner Norman Vialle.

"I'm surprised that nobody has taken the opportunity to do it so far," said Sue Miles, the Freedom Call coordinator at Overland Park Jeep-Dodge. "If I knew someone over there (Iraq) I would definitely take advantage of it. I just think the right person hasn't gotten a hold of it yet."

Vialle thinks the lack of interest is simply because people don't know it exists in the Kansas City area.

"Once we get the first call, it will be great," he said with a grin. "I think it will explode."

To schedule a video call with a soldier in Iraq, call Sue Miles at 913-381-8100.