



Video conference calls connect families, troops

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Families have an opportunity to communicate with loved ones serving in Iraq using the same technology that allows doctors to see and speak to patients in rural communities.

In a setting similar to closed-circuit television, family members can go to one of 91 sites in four states during the holiday season to have real-time conversations with soldiers, said Karen Fox, executive director of the Outreach Center at the University of Tennessee Health Science Center in Memphis.

"It's been happy and sad to get calls from mothers, wives and children who haven't seen a loved one in a long time. It'll be as real and as close some of them get to a family member," said Fox, who is also assistant dean for the College of Medicine.

During the past decade, local hospitals have started delivering health care remotely through video conferencing. The technology allows doctors to care for patients in rural and isolated areas.

Sites within the center's telemedicine network have blocked off time when clinical visits are not being done to allow families and soldiers to connect.

The service, which is being offered today and Friday and Jan. 4-7, is free and open to the public.

Currently, it is available at only two military bases in Iraq: Camp Cooke in Al-Taji north of Baghdad and Camp Fallujah. The center hopes to expand the service to other holidays and other overseas locations such as Kuwait, Fox said.

In Tennessee, host sites include Knoxville, Clinton, Crossville, Harriman and Johnson City. Other sites are available in Mississippi, Arkansas and Alabama.

"Ever since we put in this technology in 2000, we really have wanted to serve the people. This is a good way to reach out and help people," Fox said.

The Outreach Center and the Freedom Calls Foundation, a nonprofit organization that has installed the equipment at the two military bases in Iraq, sponsor the project.

For more information or to make an appointment, go to www.utmem.edu/outreach/events.html or call 901-448-4325.

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