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Calls let local families see, hear their soldiers serving in Iraq

By Scheri Smith

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Sandy Dillon wiped away tears yesterday after walking out of a teleconference room at University Hospital.

Dillon, 38, who lives in Flemingsburg, Ky., had just finished a 30-minute call with her son, Cpl. Justin Hurst, 21, who is deployed in Iraq.

"He looked muscled," Dillon said. "His smile was strong."

Dillon and her family were among eight families who spoke with loved ones serving in Iraq. The calls were made possible by the Freedom Calls Foundation, using the hospital's equipment.

The nonprofit foundation has built a satellite network so military personnel can communicate with their families for free. The group's network is connected to call facilities in three military camps in Iraq.

Tracy Lake, 28, a volunteer coordinator with a Marine Corps Reserve military police company in Lexington, helped set up yesterday's event. Each soldier participating is a military police reservist.

Lake's husband, Sgt. Chris Lake, has been in the unit for 10 years but is not deployed.

More than 20 families took part in teleconference calls yesterday in the Lexington area, Lake said.

The calls, which allow families to see and speak with their loved one through a satellite and Internet connection, were recorded on either videotape or DVD and given to the families.

For Sally Detwiler, 53, who lives near New Albany, Ind., seeing her 22-year-old son, Lance Cpl. Christopher Detwiler, was a great experience.

"There's just something special about being able to see him," she said. "You just want to touch the screen."

Her husband, Paul, said he has talked with his son over the phone, but seeing him was much better.

"He's always wanted to be in the armed forces," said Paul Detwiler, 54. "I just know that's what his calling was and I've accepted it."

Freedom Calls have been made in Kentucky before, most notably during the annual University of Louisville and University of Kentucky basketball game.

Tim Bickel, telemedicine site director for University Physicians Associates, set up the conference equipment in Louisville. Bickel said the signal travels over land lines to Germany, where it is sent to a satellite that can be accessed from Iraq. The process seems simple, but things can go wrong, Bickel said.

There was a delay in the system because of bad weather in Germany, but it cleared after about 20 minutes.

"There's no predicting the weather," Bickel said.

Families were treated to a table of crackers, cheeses and fruit while they waited for their turn.

Sally and Paul Detwiler stayed after their call to talk with other families. Sally Detwiler said she understands what the others are going through.

"We pray a lot for the families as well," she said.

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