



## Free videoconference provider may shut down

By Karen Jowers - Staff writer  
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A nonprofit foundation that has been giving about a million minutes of free phone calls a month to troops in Iraq, and hundreds of thousands of minutes of free Internet access, is running out of money and is in danger of shutting down.

“We’re within 30 days of being blacked out. We’re employing every trick in the book to keep going,” said John Harlow, founder and executive director of Freedom Calls Foundation, which has call centers at camps Taji, Fallujah and Victory, and at Al-Asad Air Base in Iraq.

A number of corporations have been long-time donors of equipment to set up call centers, even providing videocams for families back home. Since the foundation starting setting up its locations in Iraq in 2004, over \$1 million, mostly in equipment and technology, has been donated.

Still, Harlow said, “We haven’t been able to get anyone to give us satellite services. It’s expensive,” said Harlow. Satellite services are costing tens of thousands of dollars each month, he said.

“We have reasonable prospects for the long term, but in the short-term, our satellite provider says we have to pay some bills,” Harlow said.

[Freedom Calls Foundation](#) is spending about \$1,000 a day on these services, which allow troops to keep in touch with friends and family back home. “That averages out to about 50 cents per military family per month,” he said. An average of about 2,000 families a day are receiving services in the form of phone calls and videoconferences. The foundation serves about 40,000 different families, he estimates.

About 2,000 videoconferences are held each month, he said, connecting troops with their school-age children, or helping them say their goodbyes to a dying loved one, watch a child graduate, or witness the birth of a baby. Several troops have even done videoconferencing of ultrasound scans of their pregnant wives, discovering the gender of their unborn child together.

About 10,000 locations in the U.S. with videoconferencing capability, ranging from schools to corporations, have opened their doors to families, he said. In some places, like Fayetteville, N.C., these sites regularly offer videoconferences for families to visit with their deployed troops.

Many companies have donated to help the troops in Iraq, including Logitech, Lenovo (which bought IBM's laptop business), Cisco Systems, FedEx, and Broadwave Corp.

But no telecommunications companies, Harlow said. "We sure would like to get donations from telecommunications companies. They're making tens of millions of dollars from military families, and it looks like they could give something back," he said. "People may assume the government is paying for it. They're not. It's all publicly funded."

Equipment donations are in the works for two more sites — at Camp Taqaddum in Iraq and Camp Arifjan in Kuwait. But in the short term, everything hinges on paying for the satellite services.

"We've been so focused on the program, we've not been out there beating the drums" for donations, Harlow said. "If a million people could each send us \$30, we could have everybody conferencing in Iraq and Afghanistan."

"I hear time and time again: 'I don't know he's OK until I see him.' "