

Journal Star

Free calls to soldiers could be lost

Not-for-profit operation running out of funding

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By **TERRY BIBO**

PEORIA - Joyce Haley was dismayed to hear a free communication service for military families may shut down soon for lack of funds.

"I definitely believe it's a real link between a serviceman and a family," the Peoria woman said Friday. "It meant the world to me and to all of the family to see Greg . . . but it meant more to him."

Last fall, Haley signed up for a free videoconference so her family could speak with grandson Greg Widmer, an Army National Guardsman who is in Iraq.

"I'm a skeptical person," Haley said. "But these people were so nice. They produce what they say."

The video visit was part of the "See Your Soldier" program, a partnership between the University of Illinois Extension and the not-for-profit Freedom Calls Foundation. The foundation maintains a satellite network which connects military camps on the front lines in Iraq to the U.S., because there is no Internet structure in Iraq. Military families can get free phone and Internet services, and sign up for videoconferences on a first-come, first-served basis.

"That provides a great opportunity for those who hadn't seen their families," says Bob Frazee, natural resources instructor for the extension service. "If it wasn't for this Freedom Calls Foundation, we wouldn't be able to do it. They were the ones who initiated this."

Frazee said there have been two other videoconferences besides the one including Haley's grandson, but that may end soon if Freedom Calls doesn't get more funding.

"That is absolutely true," said Kathryn Hudacek, director of development for the foundation.

Freedom Calls has been linking soldiers and their families since April 2004, and raised more than \$1 million so far for its \$300,000 a year budget. But purchasing the bandwidth to make this communication possible is extremely expensive, and it hasn't gotten significant contributions for the last six months.

"We literally cannot pay our satellite bandwidth," Hudacek says. "It's very frustrating, very disappointing. I can't believe we can't raise money for this."

She said there are no corporate or government sponsors, just individuals in the \$100 to \$500 contribution range. The group needs \$40,000 to \$80,000 to get "in the clear," she said, or it may shut down soon.

"It's joyous. It's the future of wartime communications," she added. "I just cannot believe this cannot continue."

For more information, contact the Web site, www.freedomcalls.org.

Terry Bibo can be reached at 686-3189 or tbibo@pjstar.com.