

# The Post-Standard

## Company connects soldiers, families

**Syracuse-based CollabWorx helps nonprofit Freedom Calls Foundation.**

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**By Pedro Ramirez III**

**Staff writer**

Marek Podgorny didn't want to intrude on the conversation between a soldier in Iraq and his daughter in Washington state.

So Podgorny turned down the volume on the computer's speaker. He still could see the soldier's smiling face in one window on the flat computer screen and the girl's nervous face in another window.

This was their personal time. And Podgorny, president of Syracuse-based CollabWorx, is glad that he helped bring the father and daughter - and others like them - together by videoconference.

"It's a good feeling," Podgorny said. The soldiers "were told to go there. . . . The conditions are pretty bad (there).

"They deserve some sort of gratitude," he said.

CollabWorx is one of several companies, including Hewlett-Packard, Logitech and Motorola, to donate equipment, services and money to the Freedom Calls Foundation.

The Downstate-based nonprofit organization's mission is to build a state-of-the-art communications network that enables deployed soldiers to talk free of charge with their loved ones back home by Internet telephone, instant messaging and videoconference.

Last week, Freedom Calls officially set up its first communications center at an Army camp north of Baghdad in the Sunni Triangle.

The center, which is open 16 hours a day, includes 70 phones, six videoconferencing stations, 10 video e-mail stations and 50 computers with e-mail and Internet access for the camp's 12,500 soldiers.

Over the past months, Freedom Calls tested its network. In that time, soldiers and U.S. civilians at the camp have been able to witness school graduations, participate in births and even get married.

Just last week, a female soldier in Iraq and her groom in Durango, Colo., had a wedding ceremony by videoconference, said Podgorny and John B. Harlow II, co-founder and executive director of Freedom Calls.

"We've had a soldier coach his wife through a 12-hour home birth," Harlow said.

Freedom Calls now plans to expand its network.

"We will be building out eight additional facilities in Army camps in Iraq and two in Afghanistan," Harlow said.

Podgorny says it costs an estimated \$28,000 a month to run a communications center.

CollabWorx provides the videoconferencing platform for the network. The company originally developed its videoconferencing platform with money provided by the Department of Defense.

The technology was first developed so that decision-makers could hold videoconferences over a secure network, Podgorny said.

For more information about the foundation or to make a donation to help defray costs, go to [www.freedomcalls.org](http://www.freedomcalls.org).

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