

Video event seen as success even with low turnout

ANNE GLEASON Staff Writer *Portland Press Herald / Maine Sunday Telegram*

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Only a handful of soldiers in Iraq were able to interact with family members during a video conference at the Maine Mall Thursday night, but John Harlow, executive director of the **Freedom Calls** Foundation, hopes the event will make more military families aware of the organization.

Some Maine families and soldiers contacted the foundation after hearing about plans for Thursday night's video conference, which preceded the Black Friday shopping event at the Maine Mall.

"We're already working to get them connected," Harlow said, "so they can connect on a regular basis."

Freedom Calls is a nonprofit foundation that provides video conferencing, Internet telephone, e-mail and telephone service for about 2,000 troops each day.

On Thursday, event organizers set up a 16-foot video screen for the conference. Though there were audio problems, Tim Frechette of Biddeford, who coordinated the event with **Freedom Calls**, said soldiers could hear much of what was said to them and could see the crowd gathered in the mall parking lot.

"They were watching us and recognizing faces," Frechette said. "A lot of it is just supporting the guys out there and letting them know that we were thinking about them ... and having the community show that we support them."

Organizers said before the event that about 50 soldiers at Camp Victory in Baghdad were expected to participate. There are about 50 Maine National Guard soldiers at the base.

As it turned out, only about 15 soldiers joined in the conference. Frechette said seven or eight military family members - including three who came to see a soldier on the screen - showed up at the mall.

Frechette said Sgt. Rick Campbell of the Maine Army National Guard worked to inform troops of the conference. Many soldiers got the word and alerted family members, Frechette said.

Although the participation was less than expected, Harlow said large-scale events like the one in South Portland help to publicize **Freedom Calls**.

About 98 percent of the interactions set up through **Freedom Calls** are individual conferences, Harlow said. The nonprofit organization connects families and soldiers free of charge.

The organization has installed communications facilities at four military bases in Iraq. Harlow said 30,000 to 40,000 of the approximately 150,000 U.S. soldiers in Iraq are at bases with communication facilities.

In addition to setting up networks on home computers, the foundation hopes to create partner sites through businesses and colleges in Maine to give families greater access to video conferencing.

While the conferences largely benefit families, Harlow said events like Thursday's can be a good experience for nonmilitary families. "It's a very unique opportunity to be able to express your support to these people face-to-face."

Staff Writer Anne Gleason can be contacted at 282-8229 or at: agleason@pressherald.com