



Foundation to pay for video links between soldiers and families

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By [O.Kay Henderson](#)

A private foundation will pay up to three-hundred-dollars an hour to establish a half-hour-long video connection between Iowa soldiers serving in Iraq and their families back here in Iowa. The first video "call" was established this morning in the Iowa Communication Network offices near the statehouse.

It came about because an employee of the state-owned ICN got called to active duty in Iraq and discovered the "Freedom Calls Foundation" was setting up such video links. John Gillespie is that soldier's boss at the Iowa Communications Network.

"Who would have imagined 15 years ago that the ICN would link soldiers and their families here in Iowa to Iraq," Gillespie says. "Innovation has no boundaries and we're very privileged to have Andy Ryan discover Freedom Calls and look for the ICN to get involved." The video teleconferencing can take place at the seven-hundred-50 Iowa Communications Network sites around the state.

The ICN is the state-owned fiber optics network which primarily has links in schools, but also includes set-ups in hospitals and other government offices. Governor Chet Culver says "thousands" of Iowa soldiers in the Guard, Reserve or on active duty will be able to take part. The first video-conference can be up to an hour long, and then families and their soldiers overseas can have a once-a-month video session that's half-an-hour long.

"We're talking about great access," Culver says. "Most families will not have to drive more than 20 minutes to their closest ICN site." Culver says Iowa is the only state offering such a service to soldiers and their families. "We believe that things like this are possible if we get people together, work hard and try to make it happen," Culver says.

Dick Bartlett, the California man who leads the west coast operations of the private foundation that pays for the video "calls," is a native of Dyersville, Iowa. He chatted with the governor this morning by video, too, and discussed the history of the project.

"My very first conference. The family came in. The Marine...was on a big screen TV. and his twin six-year-old daughters ran up and kissed the TV screen," Bartlett says. "Tears were streaming down their cheeks, but they were also streaming down my cheeks as well." The video connections are available to soldiers serving in three areas of Iraq -- Fallujah, Al Asad or Taji.