

THE ROANOKE TIMES

Tuesday, November 23, 2004

Groups mobilize to schedule video calls for troops, families

The calls will use the same technology UVa doctors use for long-distance consultations.

By Andrew Kantor
The Roanoke Times

Families with sons or daughters fighting in Iraq might have a little extra to give thanks for this year - a chance to make a free video call to friends or family in the Gulf.

Thanks to the University of Virginia and the Freedom Calls Foundation in New York, the same technology that the university's doctors use for long-distance consultations will be offered to friends and families of troops in Iraq. They'll be able to make free half-hour, real-time video calls to soldiers, Marines, sailors and airmen.

Today, in addition to the conference-call center at UVa, four conference centers in Southwest Virginia can facilitate such calls: the Southwest Virginia Higher Education Center in Abingdon, the Saltville Medical Center, Norton Community Hospital and Bath County Community Hospital in Hot Springs.

But that number is likely to expand soon, according to Eugene Sullivan, director of UVa's Office of Telemedicine, which is coordinating the project.

"We're going to make it work at three or four sites, then expand the effort to all the sites that would be interested in participating," he explained. He expects that all 55 of UVa's telemedicine facilities will jump in. "It's all hometown troops, so it's hard to imagine anybody not participating in some degree or fashion."

Those other sites include Craig County School in New Castle and the community health center in Martinsville; Sullivan expects them to be available within a month.

Thanks to the uncertainties of war - not to mention the eight-hour time difference and the need to coordinate with local facilities - setting things up requires a bit of patience.

"Obviously it's going to take a couple of days for the planning process here," Sullivan said. "The devil is in the details."

UVa needs to coordinate with the soldiers, their families and the local facilities so everyone is in front of a camera at the right time.

Because of the high demand for communications to the United States, soldiers in Iraq are limited to 30-minute blocks of time, according to Sullivan, who was told by Maj. Richard Durost - their point of contact at Camp Cooke in Iraq - that "the lines are out the door just for the telephones and computers at their Internet cafe."

For the videoconference links, the demand is even higher. And it's not just a matter of dialing a number. Everything needs to be planned in advance.

"There's a list of sites that's posted in Iraq, at Camp Cooke," Sullivan explained. "A soldier goes down the list and says, 'Oh, there's a site in Charlottesville. I'd like to sign up my family.' So let's say he signs up for Saturday at 7. Freedom Calls will tell us that he's signed up for 7."

If possible, the soldier should then e-mail his family with the time, although Sullivan said that UVa will also be on the case. "From the information we get from Freedom Calls, we'll follow up with the family to make sure they know where we are, where the parking is and all that."

The idea of setting up videoconferences with troops comes from the Freedom Calls Foundation, which helped establish video links at the two bases in Iraq, and has worked with organizations in the United States to make the technology available to families stateside. It has been able to set up satellite feeds so soldiers can view their children's graduations and weddings, and even some virtual visits to hospital rooms.

A doctor who works with Sullivan was familiar with the foundation and suggested that UVa might participate. Sullivan agreed and contacted Freedom Calls to pitch UVa's involvement.

"We thought it a great idea," Sullivan said. "Freedom Calls has done it with a number of other organizations, but we were the first in Virginia and by far the largest."

He expects the demand to be high, especially given the time of year. But the holidays won't get in the way of the video calls, he said.

"We can handle it. We're tough. Literally everyone in the office volunteered to work over the Thanksgiving weekend so we could make it happen. If we know we're going to be doing a couple of family visits, we'll just shift our schedules and be ready to do it."

Six thousand miles away, Freedom Calls is also working to make more facilities available for the troops. It plans to establish six more videoconference facilities in Iraq and two in Afghanistan, Sullivan said.

Get connected

If you have a family member serving in Iraq at or near either Camp Cooke (in al-Taji) or Camp Fallujah and want to set up a video call, contact the Office of Telemedicine at UVa at telemedicine@virginia.edu or (434) 924-5470. They'll help set up a date and time.
