



Iowans offered video chats with soldiers in Iraq

By Dan Gearino, Journal Des Moines Bureau

DES MOINES -- Sgt. Heather Brown of Osceola had a family reunion this morning, despite the fact that she's in Iraq and her family is in Iowa.

Brown, a member of the Iowa Army National Guard, spoke to her family via video conference as part of a new program that will allow Iowa military personnel to use the state's broadband system to have regular video chats at no cost.

Gov. Chet Culver stepped in to shake hands with six members of Brown's family and say a few words to Brown, whose face was on a big-screen television.

"We're fighting for you and we're proud that you're fighting for us," Culver said.

The project, called Operation Hometown Link, is a partnership between the state and the California-based Freedom Calls Foundation.

Dick Bartlett, the coordinator of the foundation, is a Dyersville, Iowa, native. He said Iowa is the first state to offer this opportunity to all service members on active duty in Iraq. He said each call would have a retail price of \$200 to \$300 if the families had to pay for it.

However, there are only three conference sites in Iraq, so military personnel will need to be in Fallujah, Al Asad or Taji.

There are an estimated 750 conference sites in Iowa, so families will not need to go far to participate.

Families will be allowed to have up to a one-hour call to start and then up to a half-hour call each week after.

"This is a really good deal. It's super for the soldiers," said Rob Brown, Heather's husband. He hadn't seen his wife since last March.

"She looks really good," he said.

He sat at a table with his parents, her parents and her brother.

Pat Palmershiem, director of the Iowa Department of Veterans Affairs, said there are thousands of Iowans serving in Iraq. He said a precise estimate is not available because he has no count of the full-time military personnel.