



## **Culver unveils video link with soldiers in Iraq**

DES MOINES, Iowa (AP) -- Iowa soldiers stationed at three sites in Iraq can now make eye-to-eye contact with relatives back home through a new video link announced by Gov. Chet Culver.

The link is being financed by the Freedom Calls Foundation, formed by businessman Dick Bartlett, a Dyersville native who now lives in California. Iowa soldiers stationed in Fallujah, Al Assad or Taji can make use of the service, linked to any of the 750 Iowa Communications Network sites in the state.

"Most families will not have to travel more than 15 minutes to have this opportunity to share a visit with a loved one," Culver said Monday during a news conference at the network's headquarters.

It cost about \$250,000 to establish the program, and \$300 each time it's used.

Those costs aren't passed along to people like Sgt. Heather Brown, of Osceola, and her husband Rob. On Monday, the couple used the new link to see each other for the first time since Heather Brown went to Iraq last March.

"She looks really good," said her husband, who was joined by his and her parents.

He jumped at the chance to talk and see his wife after months of communicating by phone and e-mail.

"I feel lucky to even be able to visit with her," he said.

Diane Brown, Rob Brown's mother, said she learned of the hookup on Friday and has been biding her time since.

"I couldn't wait," she said.

The ICN is a statewide, fiber-optic communications network created in the 1980s, designed primarily to enhance distance learning programs for schools.

The effort to link soldiers in Iraq with families back home is being coordinated by the Iowa National Guard, though active-duty troops from Iowa can take advantage of the program as well, officials said.

"We believe this is one of a kind in the nation," said Culver.

He said the effort is designed to augment the \$6.5 million he included in his proposed budget to bolster programs for veterans returning from Iraq, including additional training and first-time home-buyer assistance.

Families seeking to arrange video conference calls with relatives in Iraq should go online to [www.freedomcalls.org](http://www.freedomcalls.org) or call Iowa Communications Network at 515-725-4713.