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John B. Harlow II, head of the Freedom Calls Foundation, talks on a video hookup with Army Spc. Stephen Davis (on screen) in Iraq from the Freedom Calls Foundation in Harding Township, N.J., on April 3.

Charity keeps troops in touch with families through Internet video links

BY GARRY MITCHELL
The Associated Press

MOBILE, Ala. — From his post in Iraq, Marine Sgt. Chad Matthews watched by video as his wife, Cynthia, gave birth in a Mobile hospital, a heartwarming connection that hasn't been possible in past wars.

Freedom Calls Foundation, a New Jersey-based charity born in the wake of the U.S. invasion of Iraq, makes the video hookups available for milestone events to thousands of military families.

Ideally, Freedom Calls founder and Executive Director John B. Harlow II said, coverage would be expanded so that every soldier coming in from a day's duty could talk to his or her family back home.

But expenses are draining the charity's \$400,000 annual budget as demand for its services grows. It relies entirely on charitable donations from individuals and businesses, and about three out of four requests are turned down.

"What we really need is cash to run the network. We're in danger of being shut down, leaving thousands of military families in the lurch," said Harlow, an attorney and high-tech venture capitalist. "There is no government funding for this. We'd like to see some."

Harlow said some calls orga-

nized by the charity are for small things — a 4-year-old girl wanted to show her father in Iraq that she had learned how to tie her shoe laces.

And there are sad calls. A soldier's sister was dying and she wanted to tell him goodbye.

Satellite Internet connections

“He couldn't physically touch me, but he was there.”

Cynthia Matthews

About her husband seeing his son born via Freedom Calls video link

have replaced the telegrams and long-distance phone lines of past wars to share homefront news with fighting forces overseas.

"I felt like he was in the room with me," said Cynthia Matthews, who watched her husband's image on a computer screen as he encouraged her during the March 24 birth of their son, Braxton.

"He couldn't physically touch me, but he was there."

Harlow said he began organizing the charity in 2003 after hearing about a soldier with a \$7,000 phone bill for calls back home. He felt soldiers were being "commercially exploited."

Freedom Calls provided its first connections in 2004. Harlow said there are now four call centers in Iraq, including 50 computers and 20 telephones at Camp Taji, north of Baghdad, and video-conferencing operations in two locations in Anbar province.

"The military gives us the building, electricity, furniture and staffing," Harlow said Thursday.

In the U.S., he said, equipment is set up by hospitals, schools, universities, law firms and others "who have opened their doors."

"From a cost perspective, our operations are running about \$1,000 a day," Harlow explained. Satellite time is a major part of the cost. Soldiers and their families pay nothing to use the network.

"We're doing about a million minutes a month in phone calls and about 2,000 video conferences a month," Harlow said.

Pentagon spokesman Navy Lt. Cmdr. Greg Hicks said the work of Freedom Calls has "boosted the morale" of those serving in the military and their family members.

"While we cannot say how easy or difficult the arrangements are, we do hear terrific feedback from those who have had the opportunity to utilize the service provided," he said.