

Technologies Across Nebraska Newsletter

# tangents



## **Service members, families share milestones, smiles**

### ***Freedom Calls facilitates 600 videoconferences a month for deployed service members, families***

*By Anne Byers, Nebraska Information Technology Commission*

A father sees his newborn baby for the first time. Families wish their loved ones happy New Year. A sleepy boy wraps himself up in a blanket for an early morning visit with his father.

Videoconferencing is making moments like these possible for troops serving in Iraq . The Freedom Calls Foundation ([www.freedomcalls.org](http://www.freedomcalls.org)), a nonprofit organization, facilitates videoconferences between family members and soldiers.

Freedom Calls has set up VoIP telephones, computers, and videoconferencing services at three military bases in Iraq .

“We were hearing about soldiers who had huge cell phone bills trying to keep in touch with their families and about soldiers buying satellite dishes and trying to build their own network—which is incredibly complicated and expensive,” said John Harlow, Executive Director of Freedom Calls. “We didn’t feel that they should be exploited, so we formed a non-profit to provide communications and videoconferencing to service members in Iraq .”

In December of last year alone, 600 videoconferences were conducted. Family members can videoconference with service members by going to over 10,000 armories, hospitals, schools, and other facilities with videoconferencing facilities. Each month 20 to 30 videoconferences are scheduled at hospitals to introduce fathers to their newborns.

Several hundred families with a broadband connection and a recent computer videoconference from their homes. Freedom Calls will send a video camera and software to families and provide technical support in configuring the software.

The Nebraska National Guard has sponsored several videoconferencing events. On December 31, 2005, about 40 families gathered at armories in Scottsbluff and Lincoln for individual 15 minute videoconferences and for a New Year's toast with soldiers of the 67th Area Support Group deployed in Iraq. Nearly all of Nebraska's 33 armories have videoconferencing capabilities and can be used by family members. Approximately two videoconferencing events a month are scheduled at Nebraska armories.

"Just being able to see that soldiers are OK helps families get through the deployment," said Aimee Lempke, Distance Learning Coordinator for the Nebraska National Guard. "You can't put a dollar value on that."

Several other sites in Nebraska, including hospitals and universities, also host videoconferences for family members. St. Elizabeth Regional Medical Center in Lincoln worked with Freedom Calls to set up a videoconference so a patient undergoing hip surgery could visit with his daughter who was deployed in Iraq.

"The most amazing part of this job is to get cards and letters telling me what a difference it has made in their lives," said Harlow. "It is really a privilege to work with people who sacrifice so much with such grace."

"We are changing the paradigm of how you can communicate in war time. Our vision is that a war fighter can go home and talk to his family every night," added Harlow.