



## Agency helps troops stay near families

### RESA arranges video link with military in Iraq

By MOLLY MONTAG  
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On Valentine's Day, the St. Clair County Regional Educational Service Agency will bring a family from western Michigan closer to their son serving thousands of miles away in Iraq.

RESA will use its videoconferencing capability to patch U.S. Army Specialist Jeff Vokoviak through to family members gathered at the Kent Intermediate School District in Grand Rapids.

Sue Rutkofske, RESA's education technology project manager, said she hopes local military families will take advantage of this free service.

"If they have a member of their family or a close friend serving in Iraq, we want them to call us," she said.

The connection is part of the Freedom Calls Foundation, a nonprofit agency that provides free video conferencing, e-mail, photo printers, telephones and Internet access to soldiers in Iraq.

Through Freedom Calls, RESA can connect families with soldiers in three Iraqi bases - Camp Fallujah, Camp Taji and Al Asad Air Force Base. Privacy laws prohibit Army officials from disclosing names of local military families, so Rutkofske hopes they will contact RESA.

John Harlow, Freedom Calls executive director, said the group formed three years ago to help soldiers communicate with their families without massive cell-phone bills.

The group did 600 video conferences last month.

The education agencies work with Sgt. Lisa Hamm, who is stationed in Iraq.

Hamm runs a building that has 30 computers, 15 phones and video conference capabilities. The communications center is open around the clock.

"There's not a day that goes by that soldiers aren't waiting outside to get in," she said.

Chris Klecha of St. Clair said her family spent at least \$1,000 on calling cards while son Brian served 13 months at a base in Tikrit, Iraq. Though they communicated with e-mail, letters and phone calls, she said a face-to-face meeting would have been amazing.

"To see him face to face, I think, would've been incredible," she said.

"Just hearing his voice was sometimes emotional, but to see him in person would've been awesome."

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