

Video sessions keeping families in touch

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WASHINGTON TWP. -- The same school district Web cams used to take students on virtual fieldtrips will soon also help families of local soldiers stationed in Iraq connect to their loved ones overseas.

As part of "Operation Hometown Link," those with family in the active, reserve or National Guard armed services deployed at Camp Tiji, Fallujah and Al Asad in Iraq will be able to use Washington Township High School's videoconferencing technology to communicate with those individuals during private, half-hour sessions.

"We are honored and privileged as a school district to offer our technology to area families who have been directly affected by the war," said Superintendent Cheryl Simone in a statement. "Frankly, I cannot think of a more practical, appropriate or rewarding use of our videoconferencing capabilities."

Denise Centanzo, the district's videoconferencing coordinator, said it's unclear how many people could be eligible to participate in the program, but the district has reached out to such local armed units as the National Guard post in Woodbury.

Centanzo said the district signed up to take part in Operation Hometown Link last year after contacting Freedom Calls -- a non-profit that runs the program.

The district plans on soliciting applications through its Web site. Those in Gloucester County with soldiers in Iraq can go to www.wtps.org, click on the link for Operation Hometown Link and fill out the form, which will be forwarded to the military for the scheduling of a Saturday session.

"I can't wait to do it," Centanzo said. "I think it would be great for them to see a loved one and be able to talk to him or her."

The district typically uses the technology for a variety of educational offerings, from bringing together classes in different buildings to share a lesson to virtual fieldtrips to museum across the country, according to Centanzo.

"My schedule is booked," Centanzo said. "I have something three times per day."

Approximately 10,000 sites around the country serve as host sites for Operation Hometown Link, according to John B. Harlow, executive director and co-founder of the Brooklyn, N.Y.-based Freedom Calls. The transmission travels via the Internet to

Atlanta, then Germany, then via satellite to Freedom Calls videoconferencing stations in military bases in Iraq, Harlow said.

"Whether it be a school district or college or state government or a national guard or corporate sites, all those folks have opened their doors to military families," Harlow said.

Users participate in the program at no cost, according to Harlow, who said the foundation operates on a combination of private and public funding.

Under other programs offered by Freedom Calls, soldiers have been also able to participate in "milestone family events" like births and weddings despite being thousands of miles away, Harlow said.

"We're changing the paradigm of communication during wartime," Harlow said.

The appeal of this kind of communication for soldiers and their families isn't hard to understand, according to Joseph Heitman, a past commander of Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 7679 in Mantua Township.

Heitman served as a local coordinator for "Project Video Connect," a program that allowed loved ones to communicate with soldiers by creating a personal video sent through e-mail to military personnel.

"Put yourself in the soldier's position. What would you rather do: Read a letter from your wife or be able to see her?" Heitman said. "When I was in the service, everybody looked forward to mail call. Now you can see your wife sitting there talking to you with your kids on her lap."