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Free phone, Web services going to Iraq

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An e-mail from a sergeant first class in Iraq looking for ideas to improve Internet access for soldiers in her unit has mushroomed into something far bigger than the sergeant ever imagined.

It resulted in millions of dollars in donations and the formation of the nonprofit Freedom Calls Foundation, www.freedomcalls.org, to provide free telephone, videoconferencing and Internet connections for troops in Iraq.

For every 1,000 troops in Iraq, the foundation aims to install at least 25 computers and 45 telephones, said co-founder John Harlow.

"If that's not enough, we'll send more," he said.

Equipment for six forward-deployed military units, including a corps support group with about 2,500 people, is in the pipeline now, he said.

Most of the equipment now is in Kuwait, waiting for U.S. Central Command officials to support moving it into Iraq, Harlow said.

The foundation also is installing Web cameras in 80 on-base family centers in the United States.

Families will be able to use those stations to participate in videoconferences with loved ones overseas and to create minute-long video messages that can be e-mailed to forward-based troops. Service members will have the same capability.

Harlow said companies have contributed goods and services worth "millions" to the project.

Corporate donors include Hewlett-Packard Co., Microsoft Corp., Logitech Inc., Motorola Inc., FedEx, Broadband Wireless Exchange, Intelsat, Hostway Corp., SkyFrames Inc., SMI, Web Street Design, Miva Corp. and Vonage, among others, Harlow said.

Gail Fewell, the wife of a deployed Army National Guard sergeant, said she was thrilled to learn about the project. "I was excited that there are private corporations pulling together to help our troops.

"A lot of people ask what they can do," she said. "There's not a lot. But it's really important to communicate."



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