

The Daily Progress

Troops teleconference home

By Claudia Pinto / Daily Progress staff writer
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Jo Vining is going to see her son in Iraq this holiday season, but she'll only have to travel to the University of Virginia Medical Center.

The hospital has videoconferencing equipment that makes it possible for people to talk with their family members in Iraq, face to face.

"The only thing better would be to hug him," said Vining, whose son Heath is at Camp Cooke in Taji. "Being able to see someone is so personal. It will help morale on both ends. I get excited just thinking about it."

Dr. Karen Rheuban, UVA's medical director of telemedicine, said 30-minute visits are being scheduled free of charge.

Traditionally, UVA's videoconferencing equipment is used by doctors to examine patients in other towns. Rheuban said hospital officials decided to allow military families access to the technology because "it's the right thing to do."

UVA can link with two camps in Iraq: Camp Cooke in Taji and Camp Fallujah in Fallujah.

"Only soldiers that can get to these two sites can participate at this time," Rheuban said. "We can only connect with places that are wired and configured."

UVA hospital has 57 telemedicine sites around Virginia, but not all are participating. In addition to UVA hospital, family members can connect from locations in Abingdon, Hot Springs, Norton and Saltville. More sites will be added in the coming months.

Eugene Sullivan, director of UVA's office of telemedicine, said he's expecting families to come from as far as Tennessee and West Virginia.

"They did an event like this in Texas and people came all the way from Chicago," Sullivan said.

In a videoconferencing interview from Taji, Maj. Richard Durost said e-mail is probably the most common form of communication used by the 12,000 soldiers based at Camp Cooke. He said they can call home as often as they want, but nothing compares with a face-to-face meeting.

"To see your family is just phenomenal," Durost said. "There is such a difference as far as the emotional connection that is made."

"You don't see families leave without smiles on their faces."

Durost said soldiers in Iraq often endure 125-degree heat, sparse living conditions and the threat of mortar attacks.

One of the toughest challenges, however, is being separated from family. Durost said he's seen videoconferencing greatly improve morale.

"Soldiers have been able to watch their kids graduate from high school," he said. "We have been able to have new dads see mom and the baby in the hospital within 24 hours after the baby is born."

Durost got a morale boost of his own after a colleague tricked him. He was told the head of a family support group wanted to talk to him via videoconferencing about an upcoming issue.

"The next thing I saw was my wife," said Durost, wiping a tear from his eye. "I was on cloud nine for days."

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