



Grants honor those who help military families

By [Karen Jowers](#) - Staff writer

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The founder of a nonprofit organization that provides about a million free phone minutes and about 2,000 video conferences a month for troops in Iraq and their families said he embarked on his mission because he was concerned about how much troops were paying for phone calls.

John Harlow, executive director of Freedom Calls Foundation, said he saw a 2003 news report of a National Guard soldier who had racked up a \$7,000 phone bill trying to keep in touch with his family. "As I recall, this soldier had a \$1,500 a month salary," Harlow told a group assembled at the Pentagon on Friday for the Newman's Own Awards.

The Freedom Calls Foundation, which saves military families about \$4 million a year, received \$15,000 in the competition, which is sponsored by Newman's Own, Fisher House Foundation and Military Times Media Group. The competition seeks to reward innovative programs that benefit military members and their families.

Gen. James Cartwright, vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said the competition and the award ceremony represents the "coming together of the civilian community and the military, the opportunity to acknowledge service and to acknowledge those who are willing to serve, and the sacrifices that family members make for those who are willing to serve."

Harlow, who began deploying communication equipment to Iraq in 2004, said the organization's efforts have continued to grow, but the group is limited by resources. "For every mom, wife or daughter who breaks out in tears because we helped them, there are three or four who break out in tears because we can't help them," Harlow said.

"It's been an extraordinary experience, a life-changing experience to work with these families. They are some of the most giving, most humble people I've ever met — and sometimes forgotten," he said. "They deserve everything we can do for them, and it's a great privilege to be able to do it."

Demand is high for the free telephone calls and videoconferences. The foundation provides about 2,000 free videoconferences of family events every month, to include more than 200 graduation ceremonies around the country this year. They connect 200 to 300 service members a month to the births of their babies back home, permitting dads to coach their wives through labor, Harlow said.

"The ability to stay in contact on a regular basis really does keep the family unit more intact," said Deborah Mullen, wife of the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, who was one of the judges. "We have to find ways to help and

facilitate that, and this first-place winner, Freedom Calls, is one way to do that. ... As service members return, the more communication they have maintained with their loved ones, it helps that much more in reintegrating the family.”

The Freedom Calls Foundation leases satellite time and builds facilities on bases in Iraq and Kuwait. There are currently five in Iraq and one in Kuwait. “We serve about 50,000 deployed troops, and anywhere from 100,000 to 150,000 family members,” Harlow said.

They have had loyal donors, but their big expense is the satellite time, which costs between \$25,000 to \$35,000 a month for the six locations, he said.

This year’s Newman’s Own competition awarded a total of \$75,000 to 15 programs. Since the competition began in 2000, it has recognized 114 programs with grants totaling more than \$500,000.

Cartwright said the competition reinforces the belief that volunteerism is not waning. “Every one of us ought to walk away with a feeling of pride” for dedicating service to the military community, he said. “Thank you for contributing, for caring,” he told the 15 winners.

Cartwright noted that 12-year-old Bailey Reese of Niceville, Fla., “coined him” when she came on stage and shook his hand — pressing into it a commanders’ coin representing her organization. Bailey started the Hero Hugs program when she was 7, after seeing soldiers passing out items to hurricane victims and receiving no thanks. When she got home, Bailey said, she told her mom, and made some cards and gave them to the troops. She and her vice president, 12-year-old Angela Riseden, whom she met when Angela’s mom was deployed to Iraq, said they use the money to pack and send more packages to the troops, coming from kids all over the country.

They get letters from troops, Bailey said, “and they say thanks for all you do, and they love the treats.” The program won a \$1,000 grant.

Deborah Mullen and Sandee Cartwright, wife of the vice chairman, were among the six judges who evaluated each of the 120 entries in the competition, rating them for creativity, innovation and impact on communities.

Other winners in this year’s competition include:

\$10,000 GRANT

- Operation Wounded Warrior, American Legion Riders, Grants, N.M.: Was started by the riders after a plea for help from the San Diego Naval Medical Center three years ago for comfort and hygiene items for troops who had been wounded in Iraq. Their mission expanded to include family members at their bedside.

\$5,000 GRANT

- Wounded Warrior Assistance Program, Operation First Response Inc., Culpeper, Va.: Helps wounded warriors and their families with personal and financial needs.

- Parent and Child Resource Center, Osan Parent Network, Osan Air Base, South Korea: Provides daily playgroups, arts and crafts activities, daily stroller walks/runs, a parenting support group and other resources, focusing on children under age 6.

- The SHARE Initiative, Shepherd Center, Atlanta: Helps with rehabilitation, recovery and community re-entry care for troops with traumatic brain injury or spinal cord injury suffered while serving on active duty in Iraq or Afghanistan.
- Snowball Express, Costa Mesa, Calif.: Provides an all-expenses-paid gathering for children of service members who have died since Sept. 11, 2001.
- Remote Warrior Care Program, Madigan Foundation, Fort Lewis, Wash.: Places wounded, injured and ill warriors back in their hometowns to recuperate before being released from active duty or returned to duty.
- Family Assistance Program, Armed Forces Foundation, Washington, D.C.: Provides financial assistance to service members and their families to meet everyday needs.
- Military Family Retreats, Project New Hope, Annandale, Minn.: Hosts retreats for families of soldiers struggling with reintegration after deployment.
- Free Home Repairs and Modifications for Troops, Rebuilding Together's Veterans Housing Initiative, Washington, D.C.: Provides free home repairs and renovations to service members and veterans in need.
- Military Family Assistance Program, USA Cares, Radcliff, Ky.: Provides financial support and critical resources to military families in need.

\$2,000 GRANT

- Good Grief Camps for Survivor Children, Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors (TAPS), Washington, D.C.: Provides camps for children whose loved one has died while in the military.

\$1,000 GRANT

- The Happy Mail Club, United Cerebral Palsy of Palm Beach and Mid-Coast Counties, Palm Beach, Fla.: Assembles care packages to send to deployed troops in the most remote locations, following through with each unit and keeping in contact with soldiers who have returned home and soldiers who have been injured. Created by a group of adults with developmental disabilities.
- CampLIFE, Austin, Texas: Provides free recreational, educational and counseling activities in a camp setting for children and spouses of soldiers recently killed in Iraq or Afghanistan.