

District reaches out to touch soldiers

Freedom Calls Foundation working with WCSD

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The Warren County School District is supporting the troops.

The district has video-conferencing equipment with some free time, and a lot of it's heavily used during the school day. However, very little is used after school hours and on weekends.

So there are big chunks of time when the equipment could be used by someone else. Say, for instance, family members of servicemen and women overseas.

"This is a fantastic program," said David Wortman, a member of the school district's board of directors and a major in the U.S. Army Reserves. "I commend the administrative team who recognized that we could use the video teleconferencing (VTC) system for the benefit of our local service members, their families and the students in our district."

The Freedom Calls Foundation is working "to build a communications network independent of military networks, employing state-of-the-art technology to enable our troops to communicate free of charge from their base camps with their families at home."

The school board members present at Monday's special meeting unanimously approved joining the Freedom Calls effort, according to board member Jeff Lockett.

"This is absolutely a terrific way to support our troops," Lockett said. "It's a great idea."

"This is giving back to the community," he said. "We're a public entity. We bought this stuff with taxpayer dollars."

"If we have the facilities and they're available" it makes sense to use the equipment for the benefit of the community "when we're not using it for education," he said. "I don't see it impacting the students."

He also said there will be little impact to the taxpayers. Asked what the cost to the district would be, Lockett said, "Just time."

"Members of the (school) district have offered to spend their time to operate the system when needed," Wortman said.



Marine Lance Cpl. Eric Bajpai smiles during a satellite conference call with his family on Saturday.

The details as to when and where the system will be available, how it will be reserved and such, have yet to be decided. "This is still in the workout phase," Lockett said.

He hopes that the system might be available soon. Bringing families together during the holidays is a particularly worthwhile possibility, he said.

Lockett worked for a company that allowed military families use its Houston, Texas, teleconferencing equipment. "We would do this primarily during the holiday season, allowing families from the area to talk in person" with active duty family members in Alaska, he said. "They would open their Christmas presents in our conference rooms and have Christmas together."

The value of the program was obvious.

"People would walk out of our conference room in tears of joy, to have that experience with family members thousands of miles away," Lockett said.

The service was rare at that time and it drew from a large area. "Even though we were in Houston, we had people that came to our location from as far away as Florida to have this experience," Lockett said.

Wortman speaks from experience on the importance of connecting with family while serving overseas.

"This will mean so much to the soldiers and their families," he said. "Being able to talk with someone is great, but to be able to actually see and hear them would be incredible, especially for the young ones."

"During my deployment in 2006 the active forces we were working with used the VTC system weekly to see and talk with their families back home," he said. "Unfortunately, I was not able to utilize this technology because there was no equipment on the Warren end."

With the pending deployment of the Pennsylvania National Guard's 1st Battalion, 112th Infantry Regiment, Stryker Brigade Combat Team, there will soon be about 40 more soldiers from Warren County overseas.

"As most in the community are aware, our local National Guard units are preparing to deploy overseas for a significant period of time," Wortman said. "Unlike active duty bases where video teleconferencing systems are made available during set time periods for the families to communicate during deployments, these options typically are not available to National Guard and Reserve forces simply because the base structure does not exist."

"It's absolutely the right thing to do to support our troops," Lockett said.

"Deployments are difficult on families, especially for the children, and I know it would do them a world of good to be able to interact with a deployed parent over the video teleconferencing system," Wortman said. "I'm all for it, thanks again to the school district."

Information about Freedom Calls is available at www.freedomcalls.org.