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CyberSpeak
Kim Komando

Tie on virtual yellow ribbon at troop sites

You can show support for U.S. troops serving overseas by wearing yellow ribbons or patriotic shirts — or you can use the Web. Sites run by individuals or charities let you connect with military personnel to send letters and care packages.

There are dozens of organizations with online tools for supporting the troops. Here are a few.

To send a care package

Previously you could send homemade cookies, books and toiletries addressed to "Any Service Member." You can no longer do this because of security concerns.

Organizations have stepped in to bridge the gap between people who don't know a service member and troops overseas. Contributions are used to buy care packages. You can't correspond with the service members who receive them, but often the Web sites post thank-you letters from grateful recipients.

Among these programs is Operation Care Package (www.usocares.org), run by the USO (United Services Organization). You can make donations online or by printing a form and mailing in a check or money order.

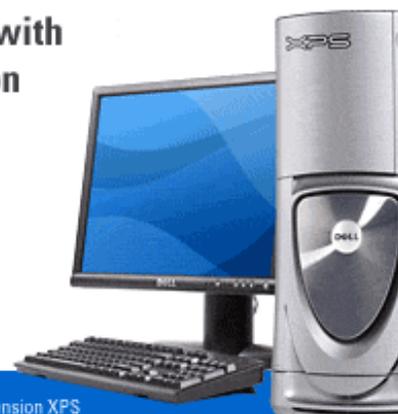
USO care packages are distributed at USO airport assistance centers and to units that request them.

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Give 2 the Troops (give2thetroops.org) and Operation Interdependence (www.oidelivers.org) are smaller nonprofit organizations. Give 2 the Troops accepts online donations using a credit card or PayPal (www.paypal.com), as well as mailed checks and money orders. Operation Interdependence accepts checks and money orders.

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Both groups also accept food and entertainment items. Beef jerky, sunflower seeds, instant drink mixes, mini-board games, electronic games, CDs and DVDs are the most popular items. Check each Web site for more details.

Although you may have the best intentions, never send baked goods. All food must be store-bought and sealed.

To help soldiers phone home

Making a phone call from Iraq or Afghanistan is an expensive luxury for most soldiers. So prepaid phone cards are big hits.

The Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) runs Operation Uplink (www.operationuplink.org), which distributes prepaid phone cards to military personnel and hospitalized veterans.

Help Our Troops Call Home (thor.aafes.com/scs/default.aspx) is a similar program operated by the Army and Air Force Exchange Service (AAFES). You can designate that a card is sent to a service member in Iraq, a wounded or hospitalized service member, or to one of several relief services that cater to specific branches of the military.

If you have an old cell phone lying around, donate it to Cell Phones for Soldiers (www.cellphonesforsoldiers.com). It sells the phones to a recycling company and buys prepaid phone cards with the money.

To correspond with soldiers

If you have the time, nothing beats writing to a soldier.

Any Soldier (www.anysoldier.com) has a list of military personnel stationed overseas. Troops who want to be "adopted" list their names, a brief description of where they are and what they need. You can sort individuals by name, service branch or the country in which they are stationed. The site says you are welcome to send care packages, but service members are grateful just to receive your letters.

Soldiers' Angels (www.soldiersangels.org) is another organization that connects you with service members. You submit your contact information to the site. The organizers will e-mail you with a soldier's name and address.

With reporting by Ted Rybka.

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