

**Miami Herald**

Posted on Wed, Apr. 27, 2005

INTERNET SECURITY

## Online dating is split over the bill

As Florida studies a bill that would promote criminal background checks for online dating sites, the industry cries foul.

BY JIM WYSS

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Love is supposed to steal your heart not your car. That's one reason an online dating site called True.com is pushing Florida to adopt a law that would require the industry to screen for felons or be saddled with awkward disclaimers.

**The bill passed the Florida Senate Criminal Justice Committee Tuesday but still must be scheduled for a floor vote in the waning days of the session. Although True.com has pushed similar legislation in six other states, no other bill has made it this far.**

**"I've got complete confidence that True is going to run this thing through," said Mark Brooks, the editor of Online Personal Watch, who has been monitoring the bill's progress. "But the industry certainly doesn't like the idea that it's being rammed down their throats."**

While True.com says it's simply trying to make online dating safer, critics accuse the newcomer, which has 3 million members, of using the legislation to stake out more turf in a crowded and lucrative industry.

Spurred on by market leaders Yahoo! Personals and Match.com, online dating sites are expected to pull in some \$500 million this year.

"[True] is using fear, under the guise of safety, to promote this anti-competitive piece of legislation," said Kristin Kelly, the senior director of public relations at Match.com, which has some 15 million members. "And it's bad for the industry because it continues to promote a stigma that's not accurate."

True's CEO Herb Vest said his concern for daters' safety was sparked by personal tragedy: his father's murder in 1946. He also said True's felony and marital screening process weeds out about 9 percent of applicants.

**"We don't want criminals and married people preying on our members," he said. "There are close to 70 million singles out there that are not using online dating sites right now. If we can let them know that, as an industry, we care about their safety then we're all going to grow at a prodigious rate."**

In Florida the bill would require large fee-based sites to either check for felons or post the following warning: "No background search of felony or sexual offense convictions is done on members who use this service."

But "Marie," a 26-year-old from Fort Lauderdale who wishes to remain anonymous, says she worries that the measure might give newcomers a false sense of security.

"There's no one out there regulating regular dating," she said. "If Florida wants to step in and say 'we're going to protect you online,' they better do a good job."

And that's the problem, said John Cardillo, a former New York policeman and the president of SENTRY, a Miami-based company that does background checks.

Cardillo said the bill won't assure that all dangerous dates are screened out. The reality, he said, is that many felony cases either don't go to trial or are plead down to misdemeanors.

"The way this legislation is worded it legitimizes garbage," he said.

Although Cardillo's company stands to benefit from increased background checks, he said True's penchant for using crime victims as a "business development tool" made him angry enough to speak out against a similar bill in Texas.

To prove a point, Cardillo said he registered three jailed felons onto True's service. They would have been caught, he said, if the company used more thorough and expensive services.

"If True really cared about people's safety, they would either shut down or pay more for better data," he said.

True.com uses ChoicePoint subsidiary Rapsheets Criminal Records to screen its users.

In Florida, Rapsheets searches 17 public record sources, including the Florida Sex Offender Records and the Florida Department of Corrections.

But the DOC database hasn't been updated since August of last year and Rapsheets only searches 15 of the state's 67 counties.

The bill's House sponsor, Rep. Kevin Ambler, R-Tampa, admits the bill has its limitations, but said it's a step in the right direction. The House version of the bill has cleared two committees.

**Two Miami online dating sites -- Webdate.com and Date.com -- said they will be offering their clients background checks, regardless of the bill's outcome.**

**"I think background checks are a relatively good idea, if done properly," said Webdate COO Abe Smilowitz.**