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*Florida bill wants online dates vetted: True.com, which offers background checks, backs the legislation. Match.com says it is a publicity ploy.*

By CARRIE JOHNSON, Times Staff Writer

TALLAHASSEE - Melanie Dodson specializes in love but worries about safety.

As an Internet dating consultant, Dodson helps people find their soulmate using commercial dating services such as Match.com or Yahoo personals. More and more, she's getting questions about who may be lurking on the other end of the modem. Could a potential Mr. Right be hiding a criminal history?

**"It comes up all the time," said Dodson, 32, who lives in St. Petersburg. "It's a really big concern for a lot of my clients."**

Now two Tampa-area lawmakers have introduced a bill aimed at making the Internet dating world safer by requiring online matchmaking services to disclose whether they conduct background checks.

**But critics say the legislation is just a marketing ploy by True.com, a service that offers criminal and marital checks.**

"I call it a solution searching for a problem," said Kristin Kelly, senior director of public relations for Match.com, a True.com competitor that has 15-million members and does not offer the checks.

True.com, which bills itself as "the safer online dating service," has pitched similar legislation to lawmakers in California, Ohio, Virginia, Michigan and Texas. However, it has yet to become law.

Under the Florida bill, sponsored by Tampa Republicans Kevin Ambler in the House and Victor Crist in the Senate, dating services would have to perform a criminal background check on its subscribers or disclose that the checks aren't done. The law would only apply to Florida users of the services.

Ambler said the idea for the bill was brought to him by a lobbyist for True.com. But he thought the concept had merit.

**"This bill is to get people to think about their safety," Ambler told the House Criminal Justice Committee Wednesday. "We do say love is blind. This is to put a disclosure there so we can lift the blinders."**

But committee members said they had concerns about whether background checks would give daters a false sense of security.

Dating services that want to provide the checks contract with private companies, such as Rapsheets.com. Rep. Sandra Adams, R-Orlando, said those companies can be notoriously unreliable and may not update their databases frequently.

"I don't want to have people coming to us next year and saying, "You put this into place, we thought we were safe and then something bad happened," " Adams said.

The committee opted to put the bill on hold until more questions were answered.

Dodson, who traveled from St. Petersburg to testify in favor of the bill, said no check would be 100 percent reliable.

"Nothing is foolproof," she said. "But you're talking about reducing your odds of being in an awkward or potentially dangerous position."

**But Match.com's Kelly said reports of potential danger are overblown and part of a "thinly veiled PR campaign" conducted by True.com. The companies have been battling for customers since True.com was launched in 2003.**

"Whenever you are meeting new people, you need to take some common-sense steps," Kelly said.

There have been very few incidents of crimes stemming from online dating sites, she added.

**But Crist said some victims may be reluctant to come forward. He received a call last month from a professional woman who said she was stalked by a man she met through an Internet dating service.**

**"If my daughter or my sister was dating on the Internet, I would want to know that every effort was being made to keep them safe," Crist said.**

Carrie Johnson can be reached at 850 224-7263 or [cjohnson@sptimes.com](mailto:cjohnson@sptimes.com)