



Posted on Wed, Jul. 29, 2009

## Prisons ban inmates from having pen pal ads

By JESSICA GRESKO  
Associated Press Writer

In her online profile, Paula Jones says she is 42, "nonjudgmental" and likes fishing, gardening and cuddling. There's a catch, though. Jones' picture shows her in her blue Florida prison uniform. She won't be out until at least 2010.

Her listing is posted on a Web site called WriteAPrisoner.com. She's looking for a pen pal.

"If you're looking for someone genuine and true, I'm looking for you," her profile says. "I'm just a stamp away."

By posting her profile, however, Jones is breaking a rule. Florida officials have banned inmates from having the Match.com-style listings, saying prisoners just create problems for their outside-the-pen pals.

Other states - Missouri, Montana, Indiana and Pennsylvania - have similar restrictions. Now lawsuits in Florida and elsewhere say the bans are unfair and violate First Amendment rights.

"The public knows when they're writing to these people that they're prisoners," said Randall Berg Jr., a lawyer representing two pen pal groups - including Florida-based WriteAPrisoner.com - that have sued in the state. "Nobody is being duped here."

WriteAPrisoner.com president and owner Adam Lovell says the bulk of the people who use his site to write to inmates are from religious groups, military people stationed overseas and others affected by the prison. Fraud isn't as widespread as Florida corrections officials suggest, he said.

Jones, who is serving time in a women's prison north of Orlando, wrote in a letter to The Associated Press that she's not a danger to potential pen pals. She says she wants someone to write to for emotional support and to be less lonely.

"Not everyone has (ulterior) motives, lies or solicits," wrote Jones, who pleaded guilty to cocaine possession with the intent to sell. "Some of us ... even if it's very few are truly genuine and hope to meet someone good in our life."

But the Florida Department of Corrections doesn't want to take any chances. In 2003, the department changed its policy to prohibit inmates from advertising for pen pals or getting mail from pen pal groups. Inmates who continue to advertise can have privileges such as visitation or phone calls revoked.

The department made the change after receiving complaints from people who had been taken advantage of and from victims and their families who saw prisoners' ads, said Department of Corrections spokeswoman Gretl Plessinger.

"We're doing it to protect the public," Plessinger said. "Inmates can have pen pals - they just can't solicit for pen pals."

Other states make similar arguments and have now drawn similar lawsuits.

In Indiana, the American Civil Liberties Union is representing prisoners protesting the state's policy, which also prevents inmates from advertising on Web sites or receiving mail from pen pal organizations.

The ACLU also says it is working on a lawsuit over Missouri's policy and investigating the policy in Montana, where inmates may not receive mail from people who identify themselves as a pen pal.

For now, some Florida inmates are ignoring the ban and listing themselves anyway. The inmates communicate with the sites by sending letters in the mail, and sometimes family members pay the fees for the sites, about \$40 a year for WriteAprisoner.com and other sites.

On WriteAprisoner.com, Florida members range from a 41-year-old who tells potential pals she's a 36DD to a 28-year-old who says he has had a "bumpy lifestyle" and is on death row for a crime he didn't commit.

Then there's a man spending life in prison for first-degree murder who has found another way around the ban.

"Please note that the Florida prison system is now locking us up in confinement for placing ads for pen pals," he writes on his WriteAPrisoner.com page. "So if you respond to this ad please don't mention the profile."