

## **Missouri DOC Bans Inmate Internet Pen Pal Ads**

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JEFFERSON CITY, Mo. (AP) -- The state Department of Corrections said today it will ban inmates from soliciting pen-pals over the Internet after discovering that some offenders used the relationships to reap thousands of dollars from the public.

The ban on Web site pen-pal solicitations will kick in June 1. Inmates who continue the practice will receive prison conduct violations, which could land them in segregation cells or limit their telephone time, recreation or other privileges, said department spokesman Brian Hauswirth.

A review by the department identified "numerous offenders, who through misleading Web postings and photos, have solicited thousands of dollars from individuals and have devised creative and purposeful intents to defraud the public," department constituent services officer Lisa Jones, who led the review, said in a written statement.

Department Director Larry Crawford said the money had been seized from the inmates to help pay the cost of their incarceration. The department had no immediate estimate on the amount of money seized or the number of inmates involved, Hauswirth said.

The American Civil Liberties Union denounced the policy as "a sweeping prohibition on speech"

similar to other Internet inmate pen-pal bans that had been struck down in court.

"If there are inmates who are intentionally defrauding the public, then the department has an obligation to deal directly with those inmates rather than punishing every inmate," said Tony Rothert, legal director of the ACLU of Eastern Missouri.

Inmates do not have direct access to the Internet. Rather, they submit photos and biographies to Web site operators who then post their pen-pal advertisements. Members of the public then can mail traditional paper letters to the inmates or send e-mails to the Web site operators, who print them and

mail them to the prisoners. The department will continue to allow prisoners to participate in traditional pen-pal arrangements, although they will not be able to solicit them over the Internet.

Hauswirth said some inmates had submitted false or misleading information to Web sites about their physical characteristics, release dates or their need of money for medical costs, education expenses or Bible classes.

In one case, a double amputee war veteran from Texas had sent money to a female Missouri inmate who claimed it was needed for her medical studies and a bus ticket to buy upon her release to travel to Texas and help take care of the man, Hauswirth said. But the inmate is serving a life sentence, doesn't have a parole date and could receive free educational help while in prison, he said.

In another instance, Hauswirth said a 65-year-old Florida man drove to a women's prison in Chillicothe to meet an inmate to whom he had previously sent money after seeing her Internet pen-pal information. After realiz-

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"Gee, I've never had a pen pal before."