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Man charged with acting as bail bondsman, soliciting inmates

BY VIK JOLLY
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SANTA ANA – A man who prosecutors say plotted with three co-defendants to solicit clients from the Orange County Jail has been charged with acting as a bail bonds agent without a license.

Ernesto Perez, 36, of Burbank pleaded not guilty Thursday to 21 felony counts of negotiating bail without a license and 16 felony counts of identity theft. If convicted, he faces a maximum sentence of 27 years in state prison. He is being held in lieu of \$150,000 bail.

Three co-defendants, who are in custody for other unrelated crimes, are scheduled to be arraigned April 12 on other felony counts in the plot. They are: Jonathan Thomas Campos, 27, Jason Anthony Gatewood, 22, and Mark Ward, 47. Their hometowns weren't immediately available.

California law prohibits any person from negotiating the execution or delivery of bail unless they are a bail bonds licensee, according to a news release from the District Attorney's Office. If Perez had been a licensed bail bondsman, his actions would still be criminal, the office said, because state law prohibits licensees from unlawfully soliciting bail business from any inmate or incarcerated person to protect them from undue influence during a vulnerable time in their lives.

In regards to Campos, Gatewood and Ward, California law prohibits any person without a bail bonds license from arranging for the bail of another for compensation or receiving commission for a bail transaction, the news release said.

Between Aug. 5, 2010, and Feb. 24, Campos, Gatewood and Ward were in custody in Orange County Jail. During this time, Perez is accused of plotting with the men for them to solicit other inmates in custody to contact Perez to provide their bail, the release said.

Perez was employed by Plotkin Bail Bonds but is not a licensed bail bondsman, prosecutors said.

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