

# Peace Corps opts to extend probe of Walter Poirier's disappearance

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The Peace Corps has extended for another year the active volunteer status of Walter Poirier, the Lowell man who mysteriously disappeared in Bolivia in February of 2001. In so doing, the volunteer organization confirmed its continuing cooperation with the investigation of the case.

Poirier, 23, was reported missing in March of 2001 after his parents hadn't received an e-mail from him for a month. The FBI has been conducting an investigation ever since, with assistance from the State Department and Bolivian police.

Poirier went to Bolivia in August of 2000. The following January, he was stationed in the Zongo Valley region. He was involved in a project to increase tourism in the area, networking between indigeneous residents and government officials in the capital of La Paz. The last reported sighting of Poirier was on Jan. 31, 2001.

Originally, Poirier was scheduled to conclude his service with the Peace Corps on Nov. 15 of last year. Fearing that an end to their son's volunteer status would end the organization's involvement in the matter, Walter and Sheila Poirier asked the Peace Corps for an extension. Peace Corps Director Gaddi Vasquez responded with a letter to the family indicating Poirier's status

would be extended through Feb. 15.

With no solid leads since November, the Poiriers contacted U.S. Rep. Marty Meehan and U.S. Sens. Edward Kennedy and John Kerry, asking them to intervene. In a letter dated Jan. 27, the legislators urged Vasquez to extend Poirier's status "for a further reasonable period or until the circumstances of his disappearance are known."

Yesterday, the Peace Corps responded by extending what they call Poirier's "close of service date" until Feb. 15, 2004. Poirier's family could not be reached for comment. But Meehan issued a statement saying, "The Peace Corps' willingness to extend the close of service date is a strong symbol that it recognizes the extension will provide some solace to the family. It is further indicative that the Peace Corps continues to share the common goal of finding Walter."

Meehan has been critical of the Peace Corps' handling of the matter, demanding a probe by the federal General Accounting Office in May of 2001. The GAO released a letter that July that suggested the Corps had failed to properly supervise Poirier, losing track of his whereabouts and only learning of his disappearance after repeated calls from his mother.

The letter focused particularly on Ryan Taylor, the Peace Corps' associate direc-



Walter Poirier has been missing for two years.

tor in Bolivia. The GAO said Taylor knew Poirier repeatedly ignored notification procedures, but took no steps to correct the situation.

The GAO said Taylor intentionally misled investigators by suggesting Poirier missed a meeting that had never taken place. Taylor later admitted to the FBI that "he wanted to deflect blame elsewhere because he felt responsible for not keeping a closer watch."

Chris Doherty, an aide to Meehan who has worked extensively on the case, said such stonewalling is typical of the difficulties Walter and Sheila Poirier have faced in the search for their son. "It's been almost two years," said Doherty. "They have encountered indescribable frustration and sadness regarding the ambiguities of this case."