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PM-PA--First Lady-Renewal, Bjt,510

First Lady Stumps For Husband's Pet Program

By WAYNE WOOLLEY= Associated Press Writer=

PHILADELPHIA (AP) First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton dodged mud puddles and ducked electrical wires in a visit here to tout the national service program her husband loves and many of his critics want to see dead.

Mrs. Clinton came to a blighted South Philadelphia neighborhood to talk to AmeriCorps volunteers who are refurbishing five homes that will be sold to low-income families.

The volunteers she visited were working for Philadelphia YouthBuild, which teaches construction skills to disadvantaged young people. Other AmeriCorps volunteers perform work ranging from environmental cleanup projects to tutoring young people.

The 2½-year-old AmeriCorps program last year allowed 25,000 young people to earn a \$650 monthly living allowance and \$4,725 for college costs.

As part of his budget battle with Republicans in Congress, President Clinton in December vetoed a bill that would have eliminated the program. For now, the budget agreement in place till Mar. 15 cuts funding by 25 percent from 1995 levels.

The three front runners for the GOP presidential nomination say that AmeriCorps should be disbanded.

Mrs. Clinton disagrees.

"It's a win-win proposition," Mrs. Clinton said. "We just have to get people to get over their partisan and political and ideological opposition and see the facts."

Mrs. Clinton passed through the city before an appearance in suburban King of Prussia to promote her book, "It Takes A Village and Other Lessons Children Teach Us." From there she went to an appearance in Nashua, N.H.

She met volunteers like Abdul Bryant, 19, who said that because of his volunteer work, he now has the skills to make a living working in construction.

For volunteer Lamar Scott, AmeriCorps was an opportunity to get away from the violence of the streets.

"It gave me a sense of values ... it put a sense of pride back in my life," Scott said.

The homes under construction will be sold for \$32,000, said Shahied Dawan, the group's director of program development. Families of four must have yearly incomes of less than \$26,000 to buy the homes.

Mrs. Clinton was greeted by many neighborhood residents who support the rebuilding program.

"It's brought up the whole block," said Armel Bowen, a woman who has lived for seven years on a street where tidy brick rowhomes sit beside burned-out hulks that have become residences for transients.

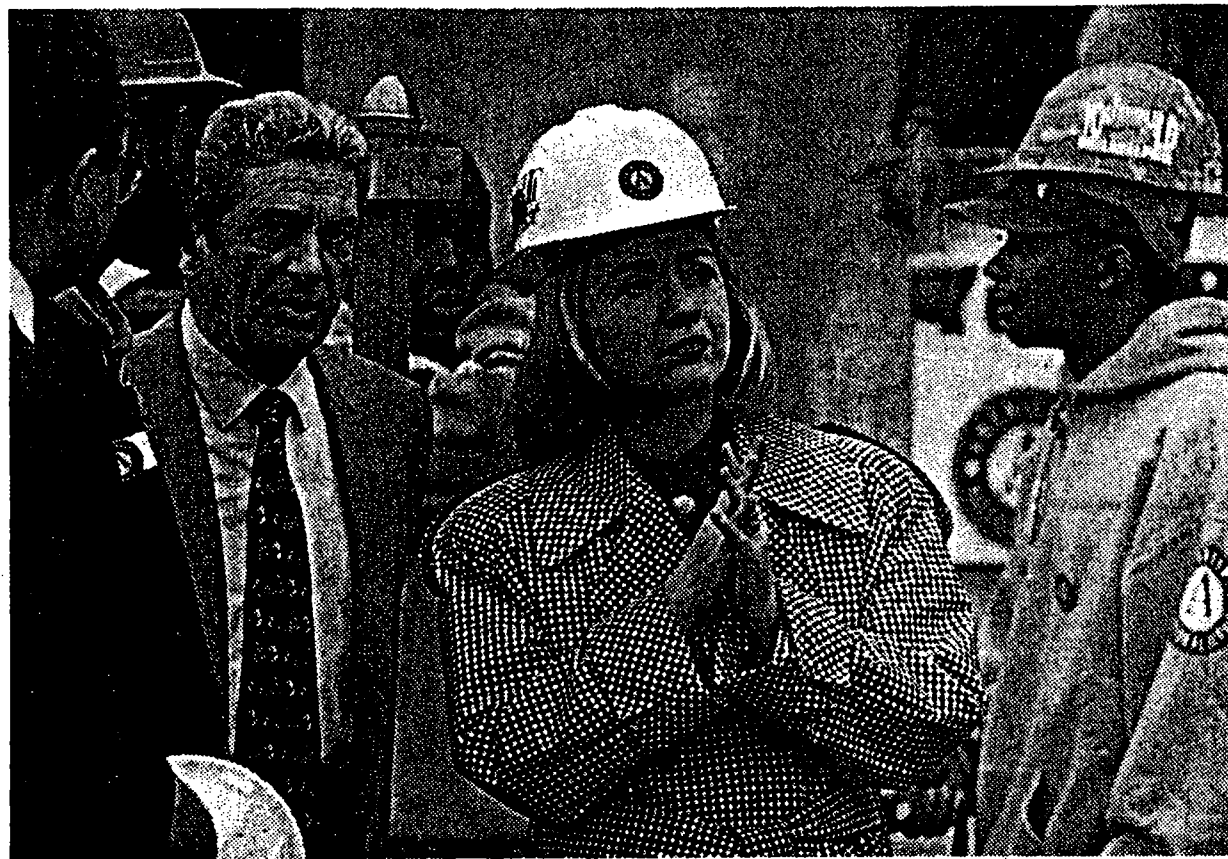
"An open house makes you nervous ... it's an open door for squatters, drug addicts and hookers," Bowen said.

Her neighbor, Ernestine Hunter, 70, said the face of the neighborhood improved over the summer when the young people began to renovate the houses on either side of hers.

"I can feel the difference," said Hunter, a retired garment worker who has lived on the block for 30 years. "I hope it will be better now. No, I know it will be better now. There's no hoping."

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Associated Press

Pillbox Hats Are Out

First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton touring Youth-Build, a construction project that is rebuilding a Philadelphia neighborhood under the auspices of

AmeriCorps, the national service program supported by her husband. After her tour, Mrs. Clinton visited a Philadelphia suburb to promote her new book.