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Millions went for poor work on PHA roofs

The money has flowed to contractors for years. So has the rain inside tenants' apartments. An internal PHA audit found problems in the bidding system.

By Matthew Purdy
and Richard Burke
INQUIRER STAFF WRITERS

Sarah Thomas says she had none of the soggy ceilings or leaky roofs reported by many of the city's public housing residents — not until the roofers showed up.

Within two years after a contractor installed a new roof on her apartment at the Johnson Homes housing complex in 1989, she says, rainwater began running through holes bigger than a catcher's mitt in her bedroom ceiling and chunks of plaster splattered the floor.

Her calls to PHA went unanswered, so Thomas tried patching her ceiling with masking tape. Finally, she spread a sheet of plastic over her bed and abandoned the room.

"I never had any problems with the old roof," Thomas said.

"But as soon as they put the new roof on, this is what happened." Despite millions of dollars spent on roofing repairs by the Philadelphia Housing Authority each year, many tenants find themselves living like Thomas — under roofs that are leaking, crumbling and falling apart, sometimes even after they have been repaired.

Since 1989, the authority has spent more than \$5 million on roofing repairs and new roofs, but 70 percent to 80 percent of the work was defective, John Paone, the former PHA executive director, has said.

The most critical — and close-up — view of the system that existed for many years came in December 1991, when an internal PHA audit found that many contracts were awarded without competitive bidding, that the work was done poorly and that PHA inspectors were not on hand to look for shoddy work.

PHA's system of bidding and monitoring roof repairs was so flawed that PHA's design and construction department got stuck with a bad roof repair on its own headquarters.

On that building, "there was a major amount of work that had been contracted for that had not been done," said one authority official who requested anonymity.

Some reforms of the roof contracting process had been undertaken by Paone in the last six months to open the bidding to more companies and intensify the inspections process. That process has been continued by federal officials who assumed control of the troubled public housing agency six weeks ago.

But years of deficient work have left a legacy of poor conditions and mounting maintenance bills, and demonstrate how PHA can spend \$50 million a year on repairs and still be landlord to some of the worst housing in Philadelphia.

PHA's roofing work is under scrutiny by a federal grand jury, which has been investigating contracting procedures at the authority for the last year, according to officials familiar

See **ROOFING** on A6

Democrats are embracing the center at convention

Speakers emphasize values of middle class

By Robert S. Boyd
and Tom Fiedler
INQUIRER CONVENTION BUREAU

NEW YORK — Democrats opened their 41st national convention yesterday with an elaborate effort to convince America that they are a changed party and can be trusted to lead the nation to better times.

"This Democratic Party is ready to go back to school, to listen to the American people, to get our lessons right this time," convention Chairwoman Ann Richards, the governor of Texas, declared as Democrats prepared to open their general-election campaign against President Bush and Ross Perot.

Richards was followed by a parade of speakers who said the Democrats are returning to middle-class values and moderating old social and economic policies that cost them five of the last six presidential elections.

Despite the penitential tone, the Democrats are almost giddy with optimism.

"New York is the start, and the White House is the finish," Democratic Chairman Ronald H. Brown said as he banged the starting gavel at 5:05 p.m. "Let's get on to victory!"

With only a few lingering controversies to mar the celebration or create excitement, the first night's convention program was designed to show off the party's new centrist ideas and its rising stars, most of whom are female.

The twin themes, that Democrats have changed for the better and that Republicans have not, were emphasized by the three keynote speakers: Sen. Bill Bradley of New Jersey, Georgia Gov. Zell Miller and former U.S. Rep. Barbara Jordan of Texas.

In her prepared remarks, Jordan said: "We will change from a party with a reputation of tax-and-spend to one of investment and growth. ... We know what needs to be done and how to do it."

Bradley also sounded repentant. "We Democrats must also look into our own hearts and admit that we, too, have some responsibility for our predicament," he said. "We, too, have often preferred the short term to the long term, our own kind to others,



With his Portofess, Father Anthony Joseph made himself available outside Madison Square Garden for Catholic delegates who were too busy to go to a church for confession. Yesterday the Dominican priest from San Bernardino, Calif., already had heard from a dozen delegates. **Convention notebook, A5.**

The Philadelphia Inquirer / J. KYLE KEENER