



# Supermarket Closings in East and Central Harlem:

A report on food justice and food resources



Prepared by

The Supermarkets Committee of the Harlem Food & Fitness Consortium\*  
with recommendations by East & Central Harlem residents

\* The Supermarkets Committee of the Harlem Food & Fitness Consortium is comprised of representatives from the following organizations: Building Bridges, Building Knowledge, Building Health Coalition; East Harlem Citizens Committee, Healthy Monday Campaign - Mailman School of Public Health, Office of State Senator Jose Serrano, United Food & Commercial Workers Local 1500, West Harlem Environmental Action (WEACT), YMCA of Greater New York, PHC - Harlem.

The opinions expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect those of all Harlem Food & Fitness Consortium members.

## Executive Summary

On September 24, 2008, area residents, food policy advocates, public health advocates and policy makers came together for the Harlem Supermarkets Town Hall meeting. The forum, organized by the Harlem Food and Fitness Consortium, was dedicated to discussing the recent spate of supermarket closures in Harlem, a problem that also affects other low-income communities throughout the city. Through the lens of access to supermarkets, the meeting touched on the broader issues impacting food policy and healthy food access. As the forum made clear, food access is not just about conveniently located supermarkets – it is about the public's health and the tremendous health disparities among NYC neighborhoods; it is city planning and responsible development; it is fair and equitable working conditions for supermarket employees; and it is a coordinated citywide policy that takes into account principles of food justice and community empowerment.

The following report includes barriers to healthy food that were raised at the meeting and recommendations to address them, information about the current policy climate, access to healthy food and health disparities in Harlem, possible sites for supermarkets in Harlem, and a summary of current efforts by government agencies to respond to the scarcity of supermarkets in areas of high need.

The recent widespread concern with food policy indicates that the political climate is ripe for making changes in the way that food is produced and consumed in New York City. This report is an attempt to contribute a crucial voice to this growing discussion: the voice of community residents speaking about the changes that they would like to see in supermarkets and in food access in general.



Ms. Emma Jackson, Community Activist, outside of the newly reopened supermarket at Taft Houses.

The Harlem Food & Fitness Consortium was inspired to address the issue of supermarkets by the activism of Ms. Emma Jackson and the East Harlem Citizens Committee. This is their story.

### Community Mobilizes to Bring Back a Supermarket

The supermarket located one block from my building closed in May 2005. At the time, this store closing was a minor inconvenience, since there was another supermarket two blocks away. My neighbors and I made many inquiries about the closed store and were always given assurances that the store would reopen. Meanwhile, other stores were closing in the area. In January 2008 the supermarket located two blocks away, Pioneer, was rumored to close. Its manager confirmed that the store would close because of a huge rent increase.

At that point, my neighbor Robin and I decided to alert the community. We created a simple flyer asking the neighbors if the closing of this store would impact the way in which they would access food. We added that if it would impact their choices they should contact their local elected officials, whose contact information was on the flyers. We then went to Assemblyman Powell's office, asking him to find out why the store located one block away and owned by NYCHA could not be reopened. We also contacted the Community Planning Board. Many residents called the elected officials. As a result, State Senator Serrano and Council Member Inez Dickens organized community meetings with the organizations involved in advocacy for healthy food choices. Because of the prominent voice of the community and advocates on this issue, NYCHA agreed to allow another supermarket owner to reopen the store.

The store reopened in November 2008. The manager and owner worked with the community to bring us quality produce and meats. We are very pleased that we were able to make this effort a positive experience. When we work together in unison, we understand how to solve problems that affect all of us.

Unfortunately, this is not the end to the story. The store that was reopened, Fine Fare, was given a letter that the new store will have to be closed to make way for new housing. There is no other place in this immediate area to relocate the store until the new housing is completed. We will again use the power of the community voice to keep this store from closing.

Respectfully submitted,  
Emma J. Jackson