

.By Monika Spaulding Special Correspondent Washington County is losing another valuable program for its residents at the end of January due to lack of funding. After 14 years, Washington County SOAR! will no longer be offering tutoring services.

Director Erica Schmidt said the only way SOAR! can remain open is if the organization receives \$25,000 in funds in the next two weeks.

SOAR! is an adult literacy program that currently serves 22 students who are matched with tutors. Schmidt said these matches may continue meeting, but they will not have the resources from SOAR! to assist them. She said she will be more than happy to give tutors information for online resources.

However, tutoring isn't the only service SOAR! offers to the county. Every year, every third grade student receives a dictionary through SOAR!'s dictionary project and all first grade students in the county receive a book through the Put Your Nose in a Book campaign.

Schmidt said she and the 10-member board are working on contacting all donors, tutors, past board members, etc. to let them know of the closing.

"We are calling all of them personally to notify them," she said. "We have officially exhausted all of our resources."

The Board of Directors, along with Schmidt, have made every attempt to try and save SOAR! Some of those include contacting businesses for more financial support, completing grant applications, cutting back staff and looking into other office locations. After Monday night's meeting, the board and Schmidt had to come to a business decision that did not come without a heavy heart.

Schmidt said the best thing about SOAR! being at the CLC is that the Adult Education (GED) classes and Work One are both located there as well. She said many of the students are dropped off by someone else and they spend the day there at one or all three of these offices. If SOAR! were to locate somewhere else, she feels the students wouldn't make the extra effort to go there.

The board has decided to sell all the materials they can to tutoring organizations in other counties, as well as donating what they can to Adult Education classes.

SOAR! started as part of the CAPE grant, but became its own entity in 2009 under the leadership of Marji Morris.

Schmidt was hired to replace Morris in 2011 and said it has been a very rewarding job.

"It's the students like the guy who recently passed his GED," she said. "He has been with us for three years. When he came in for the first time, he was reading below a third grade level and had no confidence; wouldn't even look me in the eye. He recently passed his GED and it has totally changed him. To see the students gain more confidence as they progress . . . it's so

rewarding. They think they can do anything. It's amazing to see their transformation."

In 2013, one student passed the GED, five students gained new employment, 360 third-grade students received dictionaries, 316 first-grade students received books and 1,300 youth were reached through community programs.

Unfortunately, with SOAR! closing, there will be no adult literacy programs for students to go to in Washington County. There is an Adult Education class offered at the Community Learning Center, but students must be able to read at a fifth grade level to be able to enter the class.

"We will have a group of students who will fall through the cracks," said Schmidt.

The SOAR! board met Monday evening to make their final decision to close the program.

"It was an emotional meeting," said Schmidt. "We talked it all out and in our hearts, we didn't want to do it, but from a business perspective, it was the only decision we could make."