CHENANGO COUNTY – It's no longer safe.

That's how a long-time emergency service provider described the situation Thursday after Superior Ambulance announced plans to pull its last on-call ambulance out of the county after scaling back its operation in January.

The announcement leaves the City of Norwich as the only advanced life-support EMS crew in northern Chenango County, and highlights a critical problem, said the veteran county EMT, who asked not to be identified.

"With Superior not being in the picture, the Norwich Fire Department may be called upon to cover more areas within the county, most likely causing a shortage of coverage in the Greater Norwich area. How much longer is it possible for them to realistically cover calls throughout the county and still keep an ambulance to cover the areas they are responsible for?" the EMT said. "The bottom line is that Chenango County, as well as many other areas, are in desperate need of a total public safety reorganization ... this system is no longer a safe one and changes need to be made and made now. Lives and property depend on it."

Norwich Fire Chief Joseph Angelino also questions how long his department can keep the pace.

"There is no way the firefighters here will ever be able to make up for the loss of a paid ambulance here," he said. "Our ambulance service is finite."
County EMS coordinator Jansen Casscles says the ripple effect has also hit paid and volunteer ambulances in places like Greene, Coventry and Oxford.

The ambulance situation declined in January when Superior, a Binghamton-based private EMS company, announced it was cutting two-thirds of its services in Chenango County to cut costs so it could remain in the area.

Superior did not return a message seeking comment.

County Fire Coordinator Matt Beckwith said he’s held talks with Superior, other private providers and outside county officials to brainstorm ideas and develop a plan. However, he admits no concrete ideas have been formulated or presented at the county level.

“We’ve looked at a lot of different possibilities and met with other counties and service providers and came up with a few ideas,” he said. “Nothing has been presented to the Board of Supervisors at this point.”

Beckwith said the idea of a county-wide, county funded ambulance service is a possibility, but still a ways away. He also said the chances of another private ambulance coming in to replace Superior are slim.

“It’s not a big money maker,” he said.

However, Beckwith acknowledges that a solution will have to come quicker than expected.

“We’re going to have to come up with a solution very soon,” he said. “All the burden can’t be put on the City of Norwich.”

Since January, Norwich’s EMS has been handling the majority of extra calls – mostly outside of the four areas that pay for the city’s ambulance and fire – that Superior would have covered, city and county fire officials have said.

Citing a continued lack of profitable business, Superior announced Wednesday its pulling out of the area entirely as of 5 a.m. on Oct. 25.

“This is something the county knew about a year ago. They (Superior) pulled out half in January and now they’re gone,” said Angelino. “No one should be surprised by this.”

Angelino explained that the added transport runs and outside district calls have eaten up overtime costs, put wear and tear on the vehicles and pulled
emergency services away from the communities – the city and town of Norwich, North Norwich, and Guilford – that pay for them.

“The decision is: how is Norwich going to use its people and its equipment in the coming weeks, months, to provide the emergency services that we are contractually obligated to provide?” he asked. “We need to decide how we’re going to respond to mutual aid.”

On Thursday, three out of five calls before 6 p.m. were outside the paid district. One of the calls took the Norwich squad from New Berlin to Cooperstown.

“We’re going to have to make a decision. But it’s a decision that’s too big for me to make on my own,” Angelino told the city’s Public Works Committee Thursday. “People in these outlying areas are going to be scared. Hopefully they don’t blame Norwich.”

According to city figures, Superior also handled between 24 to 30 mental health transports so far in 2007. Those transports will now likely be covered by the Norwich Police Department, the chief said.

County and city fire officials say a decline in volunteer EMTs has been the bulk of the problem. A lack of funding and down-turned economies have also added to the problem.

Beckwith said state requirements, stricter jobs, and changes in family structure have put time and financial constraints on would-be volunteers.