

Authorities: Firefighters stabbed multiple times in attack

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SAN DIEGO - Two firefighters who were jumped and stabbed by a physically imposing assailant during a medical-aid call at an East Village transit depot were recovering from their "near-death experience" Thursday, their boss said.

"I'm very, very pleased to be here today to announce that those firefighters are going to be OK," San Diego Fire Chief Javier Mainar said during a briefing at downtown police headquarters.

Ben Vernon, 32, and Alex Wallbertt, 37, were tending to an ill man at the trolley station in the 500 block of Park Boulevard shortly before 4 p.m. Wednesday when a bystander, 34-year-old Ryan Allen Jones, allegedly began interfering with them.

"He was asked several times by the firefighters to move back," San Diego Police Department Chief Shelley Zimmerman told reporters. "He continued to interfere with the firefighters rendering the aid, and an altercation occurred."

Jones allegedly attacked Vernon with a folding knife, prompting Wallbertt to come to his colleague's aid. During the ensuing struggle, both firefighters suffered multiple stab wounds to their upper bodies.

Transit security officers ended the assault by pulling the 6-foot-3-inch, 210-pound assailant off the victims and dousing him with pepper spray, authorities said. The guards then held Jones until city police arrived.

Medics took Vernon to Scripps Mercy Hospital for treatment of stab wounds to his back, one of which resulted in a collapsed lung, Mainar said. Wallbertt was admitted to UCSD Medical

Center with less severe injuries to his upper body.

Wallbertt was likely to be released Thursday afternoon or evening, while Vernon was expected to remain under medical care for another day or two, Mainar said.

Jones, who has no known home address, was booked into San Diego Central Jail on suspicion of attempted murder, assault with a deadly weapon and other charges. He was being held without bail pending arraignment, scheduled for Friday afternoon.

Mainar expressed gratitude for "an outpouring" of condolences and sympathy his department received from the public in response to the violence suffered by Vernon, an eight-year member of the San Diego Fire-Rescue Department, and Wallbertt, who has been with the agency for seven years.

The fire chief called the attack "an unfortunate example of how quickly a good deed can turn bad." He said the victims were "in shock at how quickly things devolved" during what had started as a routine emergency call.

"I've been (with the fire department) for 35 years, and while we've had altercations -- and I've certainly been in a few myself over the years with people who wish to interfere with our jobs -- I've never seen one that resulted in two firefighters facing a near-death experience," Mainar said during the late-afternoon news conference.

For her part, the police chief described the crime as "a solemn reminder as to the dangers our officers and firefighters face every single day while proudly protecting and serving the citizens of our great city."

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