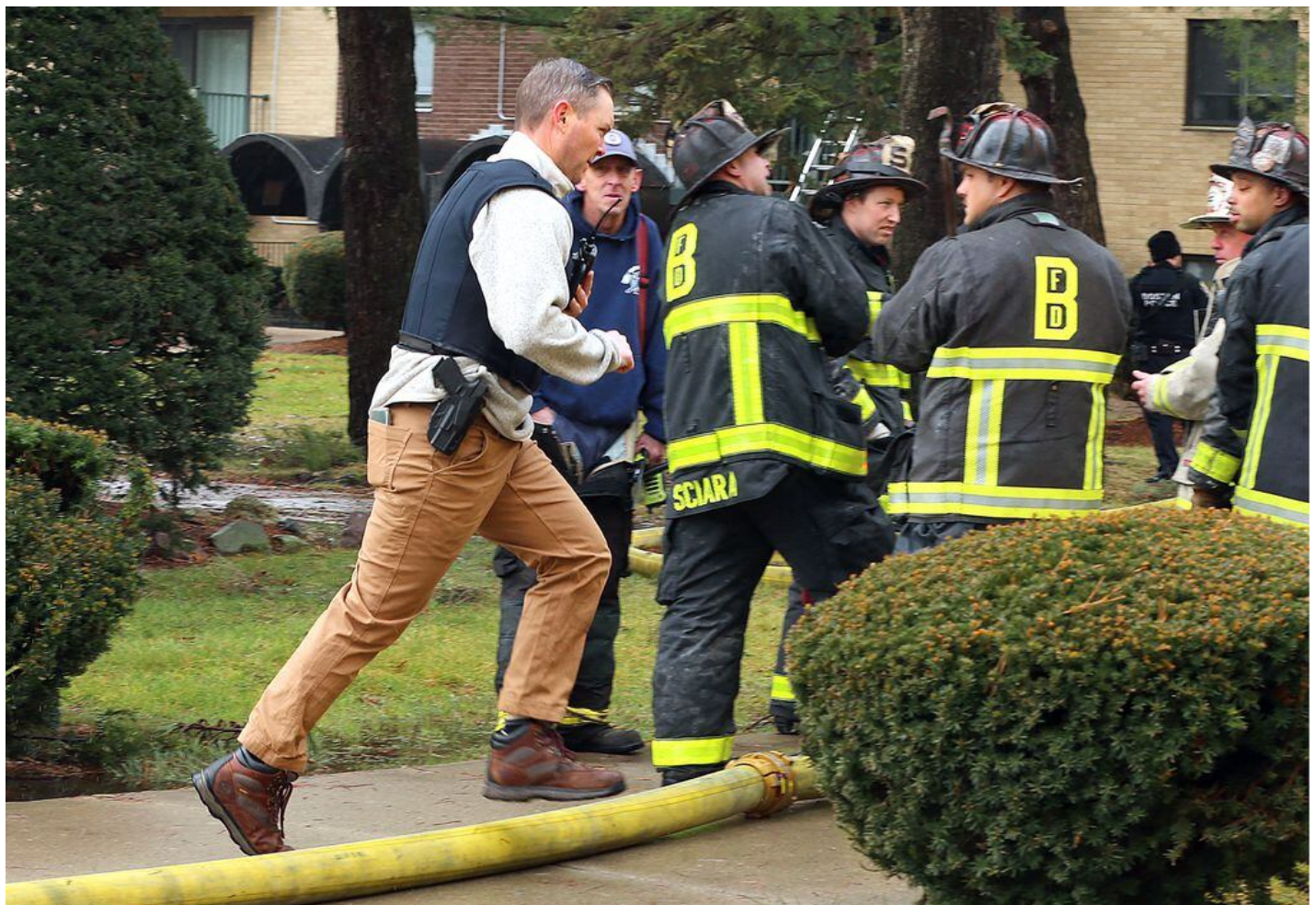


# SWAT was called to Mattapan apartment building hours before man shot at firefighters, documents say

By [Sean Cotter](#) and [Alexa Coultuff](#) Globe Staff and Globe Correspondent, Updated January 16, 2024, 5:14 p.m.



A Boston police officer ran to an apartment building at the Fairlawn Apartments in Mattapan after a suspect who fired a gun at firefighters was captured. JOHN TLUMACKI/GLOBE STAFF

The first report of gunshots behind an apartment building in Mattapan came shortly before midnight on Dec 29.

The next round of gunfire was four hours later, again behind the same building.

This time, police found shell casings outside and a man in a second-floor window waving a flashlight. A SWAT team was called in and spoke with the man, who told them he was alone and suffering a psychotic episode. The officers left after he refused to come out.

The next gunshot came through the apartment door eight hours later, as firefighters were trying to enter to put out a fire.

The 48-year-old resident of the apartment, Julius Allen Owens, was arrested after police said he jumped out of a window and broke his ankle. A police report said a handgun was recovered at the neighboring building where he was arrested. Officials commended a Boston police SWAT team for taking him into custody without firing any weapons.

But the [close call with firefighters](#) has raised questions about why police didn't take Owens into custody earlier, and whether they adequately investigated the possibility that he had a gun and was a threat to himself or others. The case also casts a spotlight on the challenges police face when confronting people suffering a mental health crisis.

Boston Police Commissioner Michael Cox said the department is reviewing its handling of the case.

"We are looking into it to make sure we did all we could," Cox said. He declined to comment on the specifics of Owens's case, but said police cannot enter someone's home without sufficient cause.

Dennis Galvin, president of the Massachusetts Association for Professional Law Enforcement, said it appeared that, based on details released so far, officers could have immediately sought a search warrant for Owens's apartment after interacting with him for the first time that morning.

"The big issue is leaving a potentially psychotic person in a crisis alone after you had information there was a problem and there was evidence of a weapon," Galvin said.

He added that officers have the authority under state law to take someone into custody and have them involuntarily admitted to a psychiatric facility for evaluation if they pose a threat.

“If police thought [Owens] was a harm to himself or others, they could’ve taken him in,” Galvin said.

Police in Boston and other departments have faced criticism for responding too aggressively to incidents involving people suffering mental health crises. Globe investigations in [2016](#) and [2023](#) found that many people shot by officers in recent years were suicidal or mentally ill.

Associate professor Sarah Abbott, director of the Center for Crisis Response and Behavioral Health at William James College in Newton, said police are limited in how they may respond when a person in crisis is alone and not threatening anyone.

If officers are too aggressive, they “risk forcing a situation and escalating it more,” said Abbott. In the Owens case, she said, “The alternative is they go in and have to use force on this guy who it sounds like had a mental health condition.”

At around 11:30 p.m. on Dec. 29, police were dispatched to the area behind 50 Fairlawn Ave. after the Shotspotter gunshot detection system reported gunfire. Officers canvassed the area, but did not find any evidence or suspects, according to the report.

At 3:30 a.m. on Dec. 30, a second Shotspotter alert and a 911 caller reported shots fired at the same building, according to a police report. A man, later identified as Owens, shined a strobe light at officers from a second-floor window, according to the report.

The window was missing a screen, which officers found on the ground with bullet holes in it, the report said.

According to the police report, Owens refused to come out and told the officers that “he barricaded himself in his bedroom because he was paranoid and was having a psychotic

break down.”

Officers left after Owens ignored “multiple” orders to open the door, and officers “were unable to provide the necessary medical help,” according to the police report.

A spokesperson for the Police Department did not respond to requests for additional information, making it unclear how long officers remained at the scene, whether they asked Owens if he was armed, or why they left without taking any action against him.

Then later that same morning, just after 11:30 a.m., firefighters received the call for reports of smoke at the Mattapan building, and cautiously approached Owens’s apartment after being forewarned by police.

“There was an issue last night, shots fired,” a police officer who was monitoring emergency calls and recognized the address said over the dispatch system, according to audio of the transmissions recorded by Broadcastify on the morning of Dec. 30. He warned firefighters to “use caution,” and to have police on hand at the scene.

Fire Commissioner Paul F. Burke said in a statement that the warning was relayed to responding firefighters, who train for active-shooter incidents with police and EMS.

“Firefighters do not often respond to incidents of this nature,” Burke said, “but it is becoming more common nationwide and we are aware of that trend and are training regularly for these incidents.”

After the gunshots, police found Owens in a nearby building. He told police that he jumped from his window because people were trying to “get” him, according to the report.

Officials estimated that the fire caused \$500,000 in damage to the building, according to the police report.

Owens has pleaded not guilty to charges that include attempted assault and battery with a firearm and assault with a deadly weapon. During a hearing Jan. 5 in the Dorchester division of Boston Municipal Court, Judge Thomas S. Kaplanes committed Owens to Bridgewater State Hospital for a 20-day competency evaluation. He is due to return to court for a status hearing Jan. 24, when he is also scheduled to be arraigned on an arson charge.

Dr. Ann Johnson testified on Jan. 5 that Owens was “expressing paranoia — he’s hearing voices, he’s terrified.”

Owens has three other cases pending against him in Boston Municipal Court that were filed last year, including charges of violating a protective order obtained by his wife, witness intimidation, and breaking and entering. In July, his wife said she feared he was going to “put a hole in my head,” according to a police report.

In 1993, he pleaded guilty to manslaughter and was sentenced to 18 to 20 years in prison, according to court records.

At the Jan. 5 hearing, Owens’s court-appointed attorney, Nancy Hurley, who represents him in the assault case involving firefighters, said Owens did not remember meeting her three days earlier and it was difficult to get substantial answers from him.

“My client said he spoke to the police through the window earlier, and that’s all I know about it,” she said.

Sam Dillon, president of Boston Firefighters Local 718, said he looked forward to “a full and thorough investigation” by the Police Department of its handling of Owens.

He commended firefighters and police for the response to the fire, and said, “The threat of violence is something that all first responders have to deal with when they go to work.”

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