Fumes kill DPW worker, firefighter in Tarrytown

TARRYTOWN — A village firefighter and a longtime Department of Public Works employee both died Monday evening after the DPW worker apparently became overcome by fumes in a manhole and the firefighter went in to try to save him.

Tarrytown Village Administrator Michael Blau identified the two men as DPW employee Anthony Ruggiero, himself a volunteer firefighter, and volunteer firefighter John Kelly. The incident was reported to police at 6:37 p.m. as a man who had fallen in a manhole.

Blau said Ruggiero was responding to a report of a sewer backup in the village shortly before 4 p.m. He said Ruggiero apparently entered a manhole behind the Consolidated Engine Company firehouse at 177 Sheldon Ave., "something overcame him and he became unconscious."

He said Kelly, who had been called in for the sewer problem, went into the manhole to try to save Ruggiero, and Kelly was felled by whatever overcame Ruggiero.

Kelly had not brought any protective mask or breathing apparatus with him when he descended into the manhole, village officials said.

Police responding to the scene found both men unconscious, Blau said.

Officers issued what Blau called an "emergency hotline" requesting technical rescue assistance from Greenburgh or any other available department.

Blau said an assistant fire chief went into the manhole, using breathing apparatus to try to bring oxygen to the fallen men.

Blau said both victims were removed from the manhole by rescuers within 15 to 20 minutes. They were given cardiopulmonary resuscitation and taken to Westchester Medical Center in Valhalla, where they were pronounced dead.

"They're longtime residents of the community," he said. "Their deaths are going to touch many, many people in this community."

Shortly before 11 p.m. firefighters lowered the flag at the firehouse to half-staff.

Tarrytown Fire Department First Assistant Chief John McGee said Ruggiero and Kelly were good firefighters who "both did a wonderful job for the village."

He said the two men had been volunteer firefighters for more than 20 years apiece.

"They were excellent people," he said. "We had a lot of laughs with them. ... It's going to be hard for a while."

Mayor Drew Fixell called it a "really horrible, tragic night."

"The entire village — our prayers all go out to the families of these two men who were doing their jobs. ... All of us want to thank the incredible performance of our Fire Department, our Police Department and our ambulance corps who went and did what they could under horrible circumstances to get these guys out and give them a chance," he said. "Although it didn't work out in the end, there was truly heroic and selfless actions by our Fire Department, Police Department and ambulance corps."

Blau said Kelly was not assigned to Consolidated Engine Company but had gone there for the sewer problem.
Multiple rescue crews had responded to the scene in the wake of the accident, including tactical rescue and hazardous materials teams, ambulance corps from Irvington, Pleasantville and Sleepy Hollow, and Tarrytown's Police and Fire departments.

The last firefighter to die in the line of duty in Westchester was Yonkers firefighter Patrick Joyce, who was killed Oct. 2, 2009, in a fire that prosecutors say was deliberately set.

Tarrytown's Consolidated Engine Company firehouse is in mourning after the deaths of volunteer firefighters John Kelly and Anthony Ruggiero. The flags are at half-staff and the firehouse is draped in purple.