Priest finds solace in 2 special pets

The Rev. Jack Okon visits the Indiana Women's Prison every week.

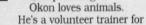He's a Roman Catholic priest bringing the comfort of a chaplain and the sacraments of his faith.

He also brings his dogs, who are one of the main reasons inmates wait all week for Father Jack.

He has two golden retrievers, Peri and Carlson, who join Ellie, another retriever, who stays at the prison.

Okon was startled during one visit. An inmate was petting Peri and began to cry.

"Is there a problem?" he asked her. "Did the dog bite you?"

No, the woman said finally. "This is the first time in 21 years that I've been able to pet a dog."

Okon loves animals.

Rev. Jack Okon

He's a volunteer trainer for Canine Companions for Independence, a nonprofit California group that provides assistance dogs for people with disabilities.

They can retrieve things, operate light switches and perform many other tasks. They're also great companions, of course.

Okon's two retrievers went through the training but were unable to pass the tests to become official Canine Companion dogs.

Still, they have the calm, attentive manner of true assistance animals.

And it's hard to explain how much their visits mean to the women behind bars.

"They love handling the dogs," Okon said.

"They talk to them, tell their problems. It's just amazing to see the doors that are opened."

The pets have been good for him, too. Okon has a temper sometimes.

"They've made me a lot mellower," he said. "The dogs have taught me."

He is 58 years old. He has loved animals since he was a child but got a late start as a pet owner.

That's because when he lived with other priests, he couldn't keep a pet.

But three years ago, he finally got a place of his own. Friends gave him Carlson and Peri.

And on Thursday, Okon will pick up a new puppy to train for Canine Companions.

It's a funny thing about the ministry: For a faith built on love, there's often a share of loneliness, too. It can even be a thankless job sometimes.

That's where the dogs come in.

They say thanks every day.