

# NATIONAL JUVENILE JUSTICE NETWORK

## FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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## VIRGINIA ATTORNEY WINS NATIONAL AWARD FOR ADVOCATING FOR YOUTH IN TROUBLE WITH THE LAW

*Honored as an Emerging Leader in Youth Justice Reform*

(Washington, DC) Jeree Thomas, an attorney with the [JustChildren program](#) of the Legal Aid Justice Center in Richmond, VA (pictured at right), is being recognized this month as an emerging leader in youth justice reform by the [National Juvenile Justice Network](#), based in Washington, DC.



Thomas is the inaugural recipient of the [Youth Justice Emerging Leader Award](#), which was created by the [National Juvenile Justice Network](#) (NJJN) to honor, each year, an advocate for youth justice who embodies passion, boldness and perseverance, and who is committed to raising up the voices, experiences and expertise of system-involved youth and people of color to ensure that those most directly impacted by injustice are at the forefront of the youth justice movement. The award will be given July 26, 2016, at an [annual gathering](#) of youth justice advocates from across the country. This year, the conference is hosted in Memphis, TN by NJJN's [Youth Justice Leadership Institute](#), of which Ms. Thomas is a fellow this year.

“Jeree’s the embodiment of an emerging leader in youth justice reform,” said Sarah Bryer, who directs the National Juvenile Justice Network. “In addition to her work representing individual youth caught up in the justice system, she helped create Performing Statistics, an innovative advocacy-through-art project -- the first of its kind in Virginia -- in which incarcerated youth create art in support of reform. In her work with a new statewide justice reform coalition, she

insisted that a former client and survivor of Virginia’s juvenile justice system serve as a community organizer –and then she mentored the young man chosen for the role so that he had the professional skills to do the job.”

To be eligible for the Emerging Leader award, nominees must have been engaged in youth justice advocacy for five years or fewer. Ms. Thomas began her work at JustChildren in 2011, with a coveted two-year award from the [Skadden Fellowship Foundation](#) – its program has been called the “legal Peace Corps,” because it ensures that some of the brightest young lawyers in the country begin their careers in public interest work such as advocating for youth in trouble with the law.

Among Ms. Thomas’ other accomplishments, she laid the groundwork for the Virginia-based [RISE for Youth](#) Coalition, a nonpartisan group that supports community alternatives to incarceration. In part because of Jeree’s work, RISE secured budget language during the 2016 legislative session that could result in over \$15 million being reinvested in services and supports for young people in Virginia.

“Jeree’s calm and polite demeanor hide a real powerhouse advocate. She is a true force to be reckoned with,” says Angela Ciolfi, Legal Director at JustChildren. “When Jeree identifies an injustice impacting JustChildren’s young clients, she moves swiftly and steadily towards resolving it and you can count on her to succeed in doing so. Jeree’s commitment to her individual clients as well as to systemic reform as a whole is powerful and inspiring.”

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The National Juvenile Justice Network is composed of coalitions, organizations and alumni of the Youth Justice Leadership Institute across 42 states and the District of Columbia, all of whom advocate for a fairer justice system for children and teens. For more information, visit [www.njjn.org](http://www.njjn.org).