



## Uncovering the True Causes Behind Rising Mortality

South Texas VHA became a two-star facility in 2016 due to rising mortality, including deaths among patients with only a 2.5–5% predicted risk. Data was scattered and incomplete, offering no way to identify consistent causes. Leaders described their efforts as “pulling strings or throwing darts” because traditional peer-review processes couldn’t connect patterns or reveal system-wide issues.

Frontline clinicians were doing everything they could, but without a reliable method to interpret documentation gaps, clinical decisions, and recurring risks across cases, their expertise couldn’t translate into improvement. After learning about SLS at an IHI conference, leadership recognized that its multidisciplinary, structured case-review process could finally provide the clarity and consistency needed to pinpoint failures and guide meaningful change.

SLS revealed vulnerabilities and workflow gaps that were previously undocumented or invisible in existing systems. It provided a structured way to humanize each case while identifying system-level failures, enabling clinicians to think critically across service lines instead of viewing issues as isolated or random events.

# TRANSFORMING CARE SYSTEMS

After a decline to a two-star SAIL rating driven by rising mortality, South Texas Veterans Healthcare System used the SLS process to uncover hidden vulnerabilities, improve clinical documentation accuracy, and guide targeted, data-driven action.

## How South Texas VHA Onboarded SLS Against All Odds

As the first VA facility to adopt SLS, South Texas VHA navigated years of required approvals, security reviews, and contracting steps across local, regional, and federal levels. The process demanded extensive documentation and coordination between multiple teams.

Leadership also had to build support among physicians, nurses, and department directors who were initially unsure of the program’s value.

### FROM 2 STARS TO 5: A Measurable Improvement in 30-Day Mortality



Mortality accounts for 20% of the CMS Star Rating.

Through consistent communication and education, a committed, cross-disciplinary review team emerged. Today, clinicians and support staff join monthly SLS meetings that focus on constructive, data-driven learning.

With the SLS process and software in place, the team can now review cohorts more accurately, uncover missed diagnoses, resolve documentation issues, and take targeted action on key mortality drivers.

## Measurable, Life-Saving Results



### Achievement

Achieved a CMS 5-star rating, improving in every domain, with 30-day mortality representing 20% of the overall score.



### Discovery

Identified critical gaps in resuscitation, documentation, coding, and clinical decision-making, reducing preventable deaths.



### Innovation

Addressed pneumonia/COPD risks by creating an infusion clinic to support high-risk and unhoused veterans, reducing readmissions and improving survival.

This is the **ONLY** work  
I do at the VA that  
**HONORS VETERANS'**  
**LIVES!** – Dr. Beal

# Building a Stronger Future for Veterans' Healthcare

The SLS process helped South Texas VHA strengthen clinical practices, standardize workflows, and more effectively support the fastest-growing VA market in the country. By uncovering hidden risks and implementing focused, data-driven improvements, the facility built a safer and more responsive system for the veterans it serves.

South Texas VHA has also shared its progress with other VA facilities, laying the foundation for national adoption of SLS. Their journey demonstrates that with clearer insight and stronger collaboration, healthcare systems can significantly improve outcomes — and save more veteran lives.

## Why SLS Worked for South Texas

- Provided a consistent, data-driven structure to identify care variances and guide timely interventions.
- Revealed long-standing issues in coding, documentation, sepsis recognition, and resuscitation that were not visible in older systems.
- Encouraged cross-disciplinary collaboration through a supportive, non-punitive review process.
- Delivered actionable insights through cohort-level analysis, enabling faster, more accurate clinical responses.

## Saving Lives, One Insight at a Time

The SLS process enabled South Texas VHA to examine mortality cases through a structured, multidisciplinary lens that emphasized learning rather than blame. By reviewing cases collaboratively, teams were able to surface missed diagnoses, documentation gaps, delayed interventions, and bedside decision-making challenges that had not been visible through traditional review methods.

Using the SLS software, the facility reviewed specific patient cohorts—including sepsis, pneumonia, and unhoused veterans—to better understand where care processes were breaking down. This approach supported more informed discussions across disciplines and helped shift the organization toward shared accountability, increased trust, and proactive problem-solving rooted in real patient cases. Today, clinicians from across service lines—including nurses, physicians, pharmacists, and social workers—participate in regular SLS case reviews, bringing frontline insight into system-level learning.

Uncover risk. Drive improvement.  
Protect patients—with SLS.



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