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It's worth the wait

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TRADITIONS

Families wait in line for hours to buy masa for Christmas tamales at beloved grocer

LOS ANGELES, California (AP)

Christina Chavarria had already prepared almost 200 tamales, but she was back at Amapola Market in Southern California early Tuesday morning for more masa.

The dough made from ground corn was the best there, so it didn't bother her that the line was wrapped around the parking lot.

"It's always seasoned perfect, ready to go," Chavarria said.

During the holiday season, tens of thousands of people head to one of three market locations in the Los Angeles area seeking the freshly produced masa that's a staple ingredient for tamales. Many Latin American families will gather to make them assembly-line style, spreading the paste on dried corn husks and filling them with sweet and savory ingredients.

Chavarria is excited to make them



Alex Diaz, left, reaches for a bag of masa, a dough used to make tamales, as shoppers wait in line at Amapola Market in Downey, California, on Tuesday, December 23, 2025.

with her mother and 26-year-old daughter this year, who's "at that age where she doesn't always want to do stuff with me." Her mother will bring roasted chiles from El Paso, Texas, infusing their tamales with a touch of the family heritage from Chihuahua, Mexico.

Amapola Market calls it the annual

"masa pilgrimage."

"We want them to have a good Christmas," said CEO Rolando Pozos. "It kind of becomes more of a responsibility than a job."

Some of the market's customers travel from as far as Bakersfield, California, or Las Vegas. Many arrive well before dawn to get in line, hours before the store opens. One group drove from Hesperia, about 60 miles (95 kilometers) away and camped overnight to be at the Downey location early Tuesday.

Pozos doesn't take the grocer's now 64-year responsibility lightly. The dough is so crucial to the holidays that in 2016, when the grocer sold masa made with the wrong corn, loyal customers declared Christmas was ruined when their tamales wouldn't cook properly. Some people said they got sick. The company said it cut ties with the corn supplier and vowed to do better.

With his slicked back salt-and-pepper hair, Pozos is well-known to the store's regulars, doling out handshakes and personal greetings in Spanish. Pozos, himself, is a regular on local TV networks demonstrating the art of making tamales. He took charge of the company five years ago and says he's proud of keeping prices stable for the third year in a row, as families feel the pinch from inflation.

Prices matter for families that generally making hundreds of tamales at a time and need a lot of masa, said Melissa Perkins, who was waiting in line with her father. Her family has used Amapola's masa for nearly 30 years, since before she was born. The production line now includes almost two dozen siblings, nephews, aunts and uncles.

"This is my mom's favorite masa," Perkins said.

In the busy season, employees begin churning out bags of masa at 3 a.m. daily, producing them as quickly as they fly out the door.

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STATE

Gov. Ferguson announces historic transportation infrastructure investments



Washington state Gov. Bob Ferguson speaks at an event announcing transportation infrastructure investments on December 19, 2025, in Lacey, Washington.

LACEY, Washington

Washington state Governor Bob Ferguson announced last week \$2.1 billion in transportation infrastructure investments for preservation and maintenance of roads and bridges across Washington state without raising taxes. If approved by the Legislature, it would be the largest investment in preservation in any enacted budget of the past 20 years.

Specifically, the proposal includes \$1.1 billion dedicated to preserving Washington's bridges, \$164 million for paving projects this summer, and an additional \$756 million for paving projects over the next 10 years. Additionally, the budget proposal includes \$160 million for other infrastructure projects, including slope control in Washington's mountain passes and other places that are vulnerable to landslides.

This funding can also be used to help Washington recover from recent severe storms.

The \$2.1 billion in funding over the next decade represents a 34 percent increase in preservation funding.

"Painting a bridge or sealing a road may not seem very exciting, but it's like changing the oil in your car or replacing the timing belt," Ferguson said. "If you skip that basic maintenance, you could have a catastrophic failure and pay more down the line. That is what these funds are working to avoid. The recent historic flooding underscores how critical this investment is. Taking care of our roads and

bridges is good for individuals, communities and our economy."

Deterioration that happens when we delay maintenance and preservation work leads to costly reconstruction or replacement, which can be three to five times more expensive than timely resurfacing or rehabilitation.

This deferred maintenance and preservation risks shutting down critical transportation corridors, which impacts individuals, communities and our economy. For example, earlier this year the state permanently closed the 103-year-old Carbon River Bridge, causing ripple effects for businesses and families in nearby communities.

Other examples of statewide preservation and maintenance needs include:

- Statewide, 342 bridges are 80 years old or older — the typical lifespan of a bridge.
- Of those bridges, 80 are in "poor" condition, the lowest of the three ratings that WSDOT uses to assess bridges. This means they have serious deficiencies such as deterioration, cracking or even damage to the primary structure.
- Right now, 45 steel bridges are due for painting and 60 are past due. Combined with structural repairs, timely painting of a bridge can protect the steel for 30 to 40 years, and help stave off premature failure.

Ferguson's proposal, which will be funded without any new taxes, can help address needs like these. The investment will be paid for by bonding existing revenues that were passed on a bipartisan vote last legislative session.



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IMMIGRATION

A Venezuelan family's Christmas: From the American dream to poverty

MARACAY, Venezuela (AP)

This was not the Christmas that Mariela Gómez would have imagined a year ago. Or the one that thousands of other Venezuelan immigrants would have thought. But Donald Trump returned to the White House in January and quickly ended their American dream.

So Gómez found herself spending the holiday in northern Venezuela for the first time in eight years. She dressed up, cooked, got her son a scooter and smiled for her in-laws. Hard as she tried, though, she could not ignore the main challenges faced by returning migrants: unemployment and poverty.

"We had a modest dinner, not quite what we'd hoped for, but at least we had food on the table," Gómez said of the lasagna-like dish she shared with her partner and in-laws instead of the traditional Christmas dish of stuffed corn dough hallacas. "Making hallacas here is a bit expensive, and since we're unemployed, we couldn't afford to make them."

Gómez, her two sons and her partner returned to the city of Maracay on Oct. 27 after crossing the U.S.-Mexico border to Texas, where they were quickly swept up by U.S. Border Patrol amid the Trump administration's crackdown on immigration. They were deported to Mexico, from where they began the dangerous journey back to Venezuela.

They crossed Central America by bus, but once in Panama, the family could not afford to continue to Colombia via boat in the Caribbean. Instead, they took the cheaper route along the Pacific's choppy waters, sitting on top of sloshing gasoline tanks in a cargo boat for several hours and then transferring to a fast boat until reaching a jungled area of Colombia. They spent about two weeks there until they were wired money to make it to the border with Venezuela.

Gómez was among the more than 7.7 million Venezuelans who left their home country in the last decade, when its economy came undone as a result of a drop in oil prices, corruption and mis-



Mariela Gómez, right, and her partner Abraham Castro, a Venezuelan migrant couple, sit for Christmas dinner at Castro's parents' home in Maracay, Venezuela, early Thursday, December 25, 2025.

management. She lived in Colombia and Peru for years before setting her sights on the U.S. with hopes of building a new life.

Trump's second term has dashed the hopes of many like Gómez.

As of September, more than 14,000 migrants, mostly from Venezuela, had returned to South America since Trump moved to limit migration to the U.S., according to figures from Colombia, Panama and Costa Rica. In addition, Venezuelans were steadily deported to their home country this year after President

Nicolás Maduro, under pressure from the White House, did away with his long-standing policy of not accepting deportees from the U.S.

Immigrants arrived regularly at the airport outside the capital, Caracas, on flights operated by a U.S. government contractor or Venezuela's state-owned airline. More than 13,000 immigrants returned this year on the chartered flights.

Gómez's return to Venezuela also allowed her to see the now 20-year-old daughter she left behind when she fled the country's complex crisis. They talked and drank beer during the holiday knowing it might be the last time they share a drink for a while — Gómez's daughter will migrate to Brazil next month.

Gómez is hoping to make hallacas for New Year's Eve and is also hoping for a job. But her prayers for next year are mostly for good health.

"I ask God for many things, first and foremost life and health, so we can continue enjoying our family," she said.

NATIONAL

These are Americans' biggest priorities for the government in 2026

WASHINGTON (AP)

Julia Dvorak is worried her 83-year-old mother's emergency room trips for seizures are depleting her retirement savings and will soon force her to go on Medicaid.

At the same time, Dvorak, who's 56 and suffers from a chronic knee condition that keeps her on state and federal assistance, expects her own health costs to go up next year.

It's the kind of financial squeeze that has made health care a growing concern for Americans, according to a new AP-NORC poll that asked people to share their top priorities for the government to address in 2026.

The uptick on health care was much sharper than on other commonly mentioned issues. It comes after President Donald Trump's Republican administration reduced spending on Medicaid, a safety net program for poor people, and decided to end coronavirus pandemic-era subsidies for the Affordable Care Act,

essentially guaranteeing that millions of people will see a steep rise in costs early next year.

The changes could return health care to center stage in next year's midterm elections, which will determine control of Congress.

"I see how it affects me and my loved ones," Dvorak, who lives outside Cedar Rapids, Iowa, said about the cost of health care. "But I also know it's affecting other people, and it's getting worse."

Despite the spike in health care concerns, immigration and broader worries about rising costs remain pressing issues, according to the December poll from The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research.

But Americans are also less confident that the government will be able to make progress on the important problems facing the country in 2026. About 66% of U.S. adults say they are "slightly" or "not at all confident," down from 58%



A lectern awaits the arrival of House Democrats to speak on the health care funding fight on the steps of the House at the Capitol in Washington, on November 12, 2025.

last year.

About 4 in 10 U.S. adults named health care or health issues in an open-ended question that asked respondents to share up to five issues they want the government to work on in the coming year. That's up from about one-third last year.

The poll shows a similar landscape to the one Trump faced at the end of his first year in office during his first term,

when health care reform was at the top of many Americans' minds. But Trump has an added complication now. At the end of 2017, very few mentioned cost of living concerns — now, about one-third do.

Joshua Campbell, a 38-year-old small business owner from Hot Springs Village, Arkansas, described his politics as conservative, and while he recalled viewing the Affordable Care Act somewhat negatively when it first passed, he said he now views it as a step toward helping improve health care.

"I do think they were at least trying, and at least trying to do something," he said. "And I don't really see that — it's one of the things from the Republican Party as well that I don't necessarily agree with. Or I think that they should be doing better at."

ENTERTAINMENT

Grupo Frontera heads to the Grammys with 2 nominations

MEXICO CITY (AP)

Regional Mexican band Grupo Frontera is heading to the 2026 Grammys with two nominations, following a double-nod at the Latin Grammys, where they competed for best regional Mexican song and a collaboration with Fuerza Regida.

While they didn't win a Latin Grammy, the band said they were honored to have shared the category with Los Tigres del Norte, a group they consider true legends. Now, Grupo Frontera looks ahead to the Grammys on Feb. 1, where they will compete for best Música Mexicana album (including Tejano) for their EP with Fuerza Regida, "Mala mía," and their solo EP "Y lo que viene."

These are the group's first Grammy nominations — a remarkable feat considering they only debuted in 2022.

"It's something you would never think, that someone who plays our style of music would be nominated," said the group's vocalist and bajo quinto performer Adelaido "Payo" Solis III about the Grammys.



From left, Alberto Acosta, Carlos Guerrero, Julian Pena, Adelaido "Payo" Solis III and Juan Javier Cantu of the Texan band Grupo Frontera pose for a portrait to promote their album "LO QUE ME FALTA POR LLORAR" in Mexico City, on Wednesday, November 19, 2025.

The idea for an EP with Fuerza Regida came from guitarist Beto Acosta, who drew inspiration from the success of their hit "Bebé dame" and other important collaborations such as "Oasis" by Bad

Bunny and J Balvin.

"Our vibes are similar," Payo said. "I feel that the chemistry is very cool."

The EP was recorded in Los Angeles, where the band took the opportunity to

record additional material, including "Tu favorita", a collaboration with Fuerza Regida and Chilean artist Cris MJ, featured on their latest album "Lo que me falta por llorar".

"The cool thing is that they are from Los Angeles and we are from Texas," Payo said of the band led by Jesús Ortiz Paz. "We kind of have a certain style that we grew up listening to ... I feel that that was a super perfect fusion."

Since the debut of "Lo que me falta por llorar," Grupo Frontera has maintained their momentum with a string of surprises and releases. Most recently, they joined Bad Bunny at one of his eight concerts in Mexico City to perform their hit "Un x100to." They also released "Beses así" with Calle 24, and the music video for "Se me sale," one of the songs on their album.

Next up for the band is a long-awaited international tour that will take them to Latin America and Europe, including stops in Bogota, Mexico City, Paris, London, Madrid, Milan, Quito, Buenos Aires and Santiago de Chile.

NATIONAL

Many deaths in 2025 had a wide impact

(AP)

The death of Pope Francis brought change to the Catholic Church, which counts 1.4 billion adherents and is now led — for the first time — by an American pope. The fatal shooting of conservative activist Charlie Kirk as he spoke before a crowd horrified many and prompted somber conversations about political violence.

And when trafficking victim Virginia Giuffre died by suicide, it brought additional scrutiny to the investigations of sex offender Jeffrey Epstein.

Meanwhile, the death of heavy metal icon Ozzy Osbourne, which came just weeks after his farewell concert, marked the end of an era in music. The year also saw the death of boxing great George Foreman, who memorably lost a much-watched match to Muhammad Ali but whose career had inspiring second and third acts as a world champion and a successful business owner.

Here is a roll call of some influential

figures who have died this year (cause of death cited, if available):

Gene Hackman, 95. The Oscar-winning actor whose studied portraits ranged from reluctant heroes to conniving villains and made him one of the industry's most respected and honored performers. Feb. 18. Found dead with his wife Betsy Arakawa.

Paquita la del Barrio, 77. The Mexican musical legend was known for her powerful voice and fierce defense of women. Feb. 17.

George Foreman, 76. The fearsome heavyweight boxer lost the "Rumble in the Jungle" to Muhammad Ali before his inspiring second and third acts as a 45-year-old world champion and a successful business owner. March 21.

Val Kilmer, 65. The brooding, versatile actor who played fan favorite Iceman in "Top Gun," donned a voluminous cape as Batman in "Batman Forever" and portrayed Jim Morrison in "The Doors," died of pneumonia. April 1.



Pope Francis leaves at the end of his weekly general audience in St. Peter's Square, at the Vatican, on May 15, 2019.

Pope Francis, 88. History's first Latin American pontiff charmed the world with his humble style and concern for poor people but alienated conservatives with critiques of capitalism and climate change. April 21.

Ozzy Osbourne, 76. The gloomy, demon-invoking lead singer of the pioneering band Black Sabbath became the godfather of heavy metal and then a doddering dad on reality TV. July 22.

Hulk Hogan, 71. The mustachioed, headscarf-wearing, bicep-busting icon of professional wrestling turned the sport into a massive business and stretched his influence into TV, pop culture and conservative politics during a long and scandal-plagued second act. July 24.

Flaco Jimenez, 86. The legendary accordionist from San Antonio won multiple Grammys as he expanded the popularity of conjunto, Tejano and Tex-Mex music. July 31.

Charlie Kirk, 31. Rising from a teenage conservative campus activist to a top podcaster and ally of President Donald Trump, he was fatally shot during an appearance at a college in Utah. Sept. 10.

Dick Cheney, 84. The hard-charging conservative was a leading advocate for invading Iraq as one of the most powerful and polarizing vice presidents in U.S. history. Years later, he became a critic and target of President Donald Trump. Nov. 3.

LATINOAMÉRICA

Seis muertos y una familia devastada tras estrellarse un avión medicalizado de la Armada mexicana en Texas

(AP)

Los controladores de tráfico aéreo perdieron la comunicación durante unos 10 minutos con una pequeña avioneta de la Armada mexicana que transportaba a un joven paciente médico y a otras siete personas antes de que se estrellara frente a la costa de Texas en medio de una densa niebla, causando la muerte de al menos seis personas, informó el martes el gobierno de México.

La avioneta colaboraba con una organización sin fines de lucro que transportaba a niños mexicanos con quemaduras graves a un hospital en Galveston, cerca de Houston, cuando se estrelló el lunes por la tarde. Las autoridades creyeron que la aeronave había aterrizado, pero el vuelo había perdido contacto con los controladores aéreos, dijo la presidenta mexicana Claudia Sheinbaum el martes en su conferencia de prensa matutina.

Los equipos encontraron los cuerpos de cinco personas y rescataron a dos sobrevivientes de los restos de la avio-

neta, y luego iniciaron una búsqueda que duró todo el día en las aguas cercanas a Galveston para encontrar al teniente de la Armada Luis Enrique Castillo, de 29 años. La familia de Castillo, en su pueblo rural en el sur de México, buscaba respuestas con desesperación, esperando lo mejor para su hijo desaparecido.

“No sabemos qué hacer”, dijo su padre, Eduardo Castillo, el martes. “Lo único que podemos hacer es esperar. No podemos ir a Estados Unidos, no tenemos visa”.

La búsqueda terminó el martes por la noche cuando los equipos de rescate encontraron el cuerpo de Castillo. Las autoridades estadounidenses están investigando la causa del accidente, pero la Junta Nacional de Seguridad del Transporte (NTSB) dijo el martes que podría tardar una semana o más en recuperar la aeronave.

Cuando el bimotor turbohélice Beech King Air 350i se acercaba al Aeropuerto Internacional Sholes en Galveston, el radar muestra que volaba demasiado bajo, dijo Jeff Guzzetti, exinvestigador de acci-



En esta imagen proporcionada por Sky Decker Jr., las autoridades y los voluntarios responden al accidente de un avión de la Armada mexicana cerca de Galveston, Texas, el lunes 22 de diciembre de 2025.

dentes de la NTSB y de la Administración Federal de Aviación (FAA).

Un sistema de navegación para la pista donde se suponía que debía aterrizar el avión llevaba aproximadamente una semana fuera de servicio, dijo Guzzetti. El sistema envía señales a la cabina del avión que ayudan a los pilotos a navegar en las condiciones de mal tiempo que envolvían la zona. La niebla era tan densa que los meteorólogos estimaron una visibilidad de tan solo medio kilómetro.

El piloto debería haber abortado el ater-

rizaje si la pista no era visible a una altitud de 205 pies (62.5 metros), ascendiendo de nuevo antes de intentarlo otra vez o buscando otro aeropuerto, dijo Guzzetti.

El avión se estrelló en una bahía cerca de la base del puente que conecta la isla de Galveston con tierra firme. Este popular destino de playa se encuentra a unos 80 kilómetros al sureste de Houston.

Sky Decker, capitán de yate profesional que vive cerca del lugar del accidente, dijo que subió a su barco para ver si podía ayudar. Recogió a dos agentes de policía que lo guiaron a través de la densa niebla hasta el avión, que estaba casi sumergido. Decker se lanzó al agua y encontró a una mujer gravemente herida atrapada bajo los escombros.

“Tenía apenas 7.6 centímetros de espacio para respirar”, dijo. “Y había combustible de avión mezclado con el agua, con un olor muy fuerte. Estaba luchando por su vida”.

Dijo que también sacó a un hombre sentado delante de ella que ya había fallecido.

LATIN AMERICA

Six dead and a family left reeling after Mexican Navy medical flight crashes in Texas

(AP)

Air traffic controllers lost communication for about 10 minutes with a small Mexican Navy plane carrying a young medical patient and seven others before it crashed off the Texas coast in thick fog, killing at least six people, Mexico's government said Tuesday.

The plane was working with a non-profit group transporting Mexican children with severe burns to a hospital in Galveston, near Houston, when the plane crashed Monday afternoon. Authorities believed the plane had landed, but the flight had lost contact with air controllers, Mexican President Claudia Sheinbaum said Tuesday in her morning briefing.

Teams found the dead bodies of five people and pulled two survivors from the plane's wreckage, then set off on a daylong search in the waters near Galveston for 29-year-old Navy Lieutenant Luis Enrique Castillo. Castillo's

family back in their rural town in southern Mexico were left scrambling for answers, hoping for the best for their missing son.

“We don't know what to do,” his father Eduardo Castillo said Tuesday. “All we can do is wait. We can't go to the United States, we have no visa.”

The search came to an end Tuesday night when search teams found Castillo's body. American authorities are investigating the cause, but the National Transportation Safety Board said Tuesday that it could take a week or more to recover the aircraft.

As the twin turboprop Beech King Air 350i approached Sholes International Airport in Galveston, radar shows it was far too low, said Jeff Guzzetti, a former NTSB and Federal Aviation Administration crash investigator.

A navigation system for the runway where the plane was supposed to land had been out of service for about a week,



In this image provided by Sky Decker Jr., authorities and volunteers respond to a Mexican Navy plane crash near Galveston, Texas, on Monday, December 22, 2025.

Guzzetti said. The system sends signals to the airplane cockpit that helps pilots navigate in the kind of bad weather that had enveloped the area. The fog was so thick that meteorologists estimated only about a half-mile of visibility.

The pilot should have aborted the landing if the runway wasn't visible at an altitude of 205 feet (62.5 meters), climbing back up before trying again

or looking for another airport entirely, Guzzetti said.

The plane crashed in a bay near the base of the causeway connecting Galveston Island to the mainland. The popular beach destination is about 50 miles (80 kilometers) southeast of Houston.

Sky Decker, a professional yacht captain who lives near the crash site, said he jumped in his boat to see if he could help. He picked up two police officers who guided him through the thick fog to the nearly submerged plane. Decker jumped into the water and found a badly injured woman trapped beneath chairs and other debris.

“She had maybe 3 inches (7.6 centimeters) of air gap to breathe in,” he said. “And there was jet fuel in there mixed with the water, fumes real bad. She was really fighting for her life.”

He said he also pulled out a man seated in front of her who had already died.