

Demand Doubled. Supply Collapsed. The Math Broke.

Why the math behind America's clinical nutrition workforce just broke — and what to do about it.

Jason Fee, MS, RDN, LDN · Independent professional analysis · May 2026

WHAT THIS RESEARCH IS

This is an independent national analysis of compensation, training, and federal nutrition policy in clinical dietetics — the profession of **Registered Dietitian Nutritionists (RDNs)**, the credentialed experts who deliver medical nutrition therapy in hospitals, clinics, and outpatient settings. It pulls together May 2026 federal labor-statistics data (BLS OEWS), Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services 2026 hospital quality measures, the federal student-loan reform that takes effect July 2026 (the One Big Beautiful Bill Act, P.L. 119-21), and workforce-tracking data from the Commission on Dietetic Registration and ACEND.

WHY IT MATTERS NOW

Three forces are colliding in 2026.

One. Federal nutrition policy is expanding faster than at any point in a generation — the Make America Healthy Again Commission, the new 2025-2030 Dietary Guidelines, and a CMS hospital quality measure that **roughly doubles** the population for which RDN-led nutrition assessment is the measured standard of care.

Two. Chronic disease in the United States now affects about **60% of adults** and drives about **90% of the country's \$4.87 trillion** annual health spending. Diet is one of the leading modifiable drivers of that burden.

Three. The credentialed RDN workforce just posted its **first observed decline** on the national registry — at the exact moment new federal student-loan rules eliminate the financial path that previously made the master's-mandated RDN credential affordable.

THE CENTRAL FINDING

At the U.S. national mean wage of **\$77,130 a year**, with the new post-July-2026 graduate-loan rules, the standard amortization on the master's-mandated RDN credential produces a **negative annual disposable income** in any typical major-metropolitan market.

By the same federal labor-statistics file released May 15, 2026: Physical Therapists earn **\$105,280**, Registered Nurses **\$101,420**, Occupational Therapists **\$101,280**, Speech-Language Pathologists **\$98,170**, and even associate's-degree Respiratory Therapists **\$87,300** — all in the same hospital industries, all on the same data release.

The Registered Dietitian Nutritionist is the only master's-mandated allied-health credential where the credential math fails.

THE PROPOSAL — A FOUR-PILLAR FRAMEWORK

A \$100,000 / \$48.08-per-hour national clinical RDN minimum is the wage the U.S. labor market already pays to peer credentials in the same employment industries. The four-pillar framework operationalizes this as a national reform package:

PAY	A \$48.08/hr · \$100,000/yr national clinical RDN minimum, anchored to BLS-validated peer wages and e
BILL	Pass the Medical Nutrition Therapy Act (H.R. 6199 / S. 3934, 119th Congress). Expands Medicare nutri
BUILD	Credential-anchored federal workforce investment: paid pre-RDN apprenticeships at Federally Qualified
PROTECT	Federal Medical Nutrition Therapy scope of practice anchored to the RDN credential (parallel to how Me

WHO SHOULD READ THIS

- **RDNs and other nutrition professionals** — for compensation negotiation, advocacy framing, and pipeline conversations with leadership.
- **Hospital and health-system finance and HR leadership** — for retention strategy, MCS attestation risk, and Medical Nutrition Therapy revenue planning.
- **Federal nutrition policy stakeholders** — MAHA Commission staff, HHS, USDA, HRSA, CMS, MedPAC, and congressional health committees.
- **Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics members** — DPG leaders, state affiliates, and Foundation grant reviewers.
- **Journalists and researchers** covering MAHA, the chronic-disease economy, health workforce, or dietetics education.

DOWNLOAD THE FULL ANALYSIS

The full memo includes 84 primary-source citations: BLS Occupational Employment & Wage Statistics May 2025, the Commission on Dietetic Registration registry snapshots, ACEND annual reports 2014-2024, CMS Hospital IQR Final Rule, OECD Health Statistics 2024, NHS Agenda for Change 2024/25, peer-reviewed clinical outcomes literature (Berkowitz JAMA Internal Medicine 2019; Valladares JPEN 2021), and the One Big Beautiful Bill Act student-loan provisions effective July 1, 2026.

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